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Alice Hastings

THE CLOVEN FOOT

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF
'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes

VOL. II.



LONDON
JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL
MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

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THE CLOVEN FOOT.

CHAPTER I.

EDWARD CLARE DISCOVERS A LIKENESS.

HAZLEHURST RECTORY, February 22nd. — Dear Ned,—Do you remember my saying, when Laura refused to have a proper wedding gown, that her marriage was altogether an ill-omened business? I told her so, I told you so; in fact, I think I told everybody so; if it be not an unpardonable exaggeration to call the handful of wretched dowdies and frumps in such a place as Hazlehurst everybody. Well, I was right. The marriage has been a complete *fiasco*. What do you think of our poor Laura's coming home from her honeymoon *alone*?

Without even so much as her husband's port-manteau! She has shut herself up in the Manor House, where she lives the life of a female ancho-rite, and is so reserved in her manner towards me, her oldest friend, her all but sister, that even *I* do not know the cause of this extraordinary state of affairs.

“My dear Celia, don't ask me anything about it,” she said, when we had kissed each other, and cried a little, and I had looked at her collar and cuffs, to see if she had brought a new style from Paris.

“My dearest, I must ask you,” I replied; “I don't pretend to be more than human, and I am burning with curiosity and suppressed indignation. What does it all mean? Why have you challenged public opinion by coming home alone? Have you and Mr. Treverton quarrelled?”

“No,” she said, decisively; “and that is the last question about my married life that I shall ever answer, Celia, so you need not ask me any more.”

“Where did you part with him?” I asked,

determined not to give way. My unhappy friend was obstinately silent.

“Come and see me as often as you like, so long as you do not talk to me of my husband,” she said, a little later. “But if you insist upon talking about him, I shall shut my door upon you.”

“I hear he has acted most generously with regard to the settlements, so he cannot be altogether bad,” I said—for you know I am not easily put down—but Laura was adamant. I could not extort another word from her.

“Perhaps I ought not to tell you this, Ned, knowing what I do about your former affection for Laura; but I felt that I must open my heart to somebody. Parents are so stupid that it’s impossible to tell them things.

“I can’t conceive what this poor girl is going to do with her life. He has settled the whole estate upon her, papa says, and she is awfully rich. But she is living like a hermit, and not spending more than her own small income. She even talks of selling the carriage-horses, Tommy

and Harry, or sending them back to the plough, though I know she dotes upon them. If this is meanness, it is too awful. If she has conscientious scruples about spending John Treverton's money, it is simply idiotic. Of the two, I could rather think my friend a miser than an idiot.

‘And now, my dear Ned, as there is nothing else to tell you about the dismalest place in the universe, I may as well say good-bye.—Your loving sister,

‘CELIA.’

‘P.S.—I hope you are writing a book of poems that will make the Laureate burst with envy. I have no personal animosity to him; but you are my brother, and, of course, your interests must be paramount.’

This letter reached Edward Clare in his dingy lodgings, in a narrow side street near the British Museum, lodgings so dingy that it would have grieved the heart of his country-born and country-bred mother to see her boy in such a den. But the apartments were quite dear enough for his slender means. The world had not yet awakened to the stupendous fact that a new poet had been

born into it. Stupid reviewers went on prosing about Tennyson, Browning, and Swinburne, and the name of Clare was still unknown; even though it had appeared pretty often at the foot of a neat triplet of verses filling an odd page in a magazine.

‘I shall never win a name in the magazines,’ the young man told himself. ‘It is worse than not writing at all. I shall rot unknown in my garret, or die of hunger and opium, like that poor boy who perished within a quarter of a mile of this dismal hole, unless I can get some rich publisher to launch me properly.’

But in the meantime a man must live, and Edward was very glad to get an occasional guinea or two from a magazine. The supplies from home fell considerably below his requirements, though to send them strained the father’s resources. The embryo Laureate liked to take life pleasantly. He liked to dine at a popular restaurant, and to wash down his dinner with good Rhine wine, or sound claret. He liked good cigars. He could not wear cheap boots. He could

do without gloves at a pinch, but those he wore must be the best. When he was in funds he preferred a hansom to pedestrianism. This, he told himself, was the poetical temperament. Alfred de Musset was, doubtless, just such a man. He could fancy Heine leading the same kind of life in Paris, before disease had chained him to his bed.

That letter from Celia was like vitriol dropped into an open wound. Edward had not forgiven Laura for accepting John Treverton, or the estate that went with him. He hated John Treverton with a vigorous hatred that would stand a great deal of wear and tear. He pondered long over Celia's letter, trying to discover the clue to the mystery. It seemed to him tolerably clear. Mr. and Mrs. Treverton had married with a deliberate understanding. Love between them there was none, and they had been too honest to pretend an affection which neither felt. They had agreed to marry and live apart, sharing the dead man's wealth, fulfilling the letter of the law, but not the spirit.

‘I call it sheer dishonesty,’ said Edward. ‘I

wonder that Laura can lend herself to such an underhand course.'

It was all very well to talk about John Treveton's liberality in settling the entire estate upon his wife. No doubt they had their private understanding, duly set forth in black and white. The husband was to have his share of the fortune, and squander it how he pleased in London or Paris, or any part of the globe that seemed best to him.

'There never was such confounded luck,' exclaimed Edward, angry with Fate for having given this man so much and himself so little; 'a fellow who three months ago was a beggar.'

In his idle reverie he found himself thinking what he would have done in John Treverton's place, with, say, seven thousand a year at his disposal.

'I would have chambers in the Albany,' he thought, 'furnished on the purest æsthetic principles. I'd keep a yacht at Cowes, and three or four hunters at Melton Mowbray. I'd spend February and March in the south, and April and May in Paris, where I

should have a *piéd à terre* in the Champs Elysées. Yes, one could lead a very pleasant life, as a bachelor, on seven thousand a year.'

Thus it will be seen that, although Mr. Clare had been seriously in love with Miss Malcolm, it was the loss of Jasper Treverton's money which he felt most keenly, and it was the possession of that fortune for which he envied John Treverton.

One afternoon in February, one of those rare afternoons on which the winter sun glorifies the gloomy London streets, Mr. Clare called at the office of a comic periodical, the editor of which had accepted some of his lighter verses—society poems in the Praed and Locker manner. Two or three of his contributions had been published within the last month, and he came to the office with the pleasant consciousness that there was a cheque due to him.

'I shall treat myself to a careful little dinner at the *Restaurant du Pavillon*,' he told himself, 'and a stall at the Prince of Wales's to wind up the evening.'

- He was not a man of vicious tastes. It was not

the *aqua fortis* of vice, but the champagne of pleasure that he relished. He was too fond of himself, too careful of his own well-being, to fling away youth, health, and vigour in the sloughs and sewers of evil living. He had a refined selfishness that was calculated to keep him pure of low iniquities. He had no aspiration to scale mountain peaks, but he had sufficient regard for himself to eschew gutters.

The cheque was ready for him, but, when he had signed the formal receipt, the clerk told him the editor wanted to speak to him presently, if he would be kind enough to wait a few minutes.

‘There’s a gentleman with him, but I don’t suppose he’ll be long,’ said the clerk. ‘if you don’t mind waiting.’

Mr. Clare did not mind, particularly. He sat down on an office stool, and made himself a cigarette, while he thoughtfully planned his dinner.

He was not going to be extravagant. A plate of bisque soup, a slice of salmon *en papillote*, a wing of chicken with mushrooms, an omelette, half a bottle of St. Julien, and a glass of vermouth.

While he was musing pleasantly thus, the swinging inner door of the office was dashed open, and a gentleman walked quickly through to the open doorway that led into the street, with only a passing nod to the clerk. Edward Clare just caught a glimpse of his face as he turned to give that brief salutation.

‘Who’s that?’ he asked, starting up from his stool, and dropping the half-made cigarette.

‘Mr. Chicot, the artist.’

‘Are you sure?’

The clerk grinned.

‘Pretty positive,’ he said. ‘He comes here every week, sometimes twice a week. I ought to know him.’

Edward knew the name well. The slap-dash caricatures, more Parisian in style than English, which adorned the middle page of the weekly paper called ‘FOLLY AS IT FLIES,’ were all signed ‘Chicot.’ The dancer’s admirers, for the most part, gave her the credit of those productions, an idea which Mr. Smolendo had taken care to encourage. It was an advantage that his dancer should be thought

a woman of many accomplishments — a Sarah Bernhardt, in a small way.

Edward Clare was mystified. The face which he had seen turned towards the clerk had presented a wondrous likeness of John Treverton. If this man who called himself Chicot had been John Treverton's twin brother, the two could not have been more alike. Edward was so impressed with this idea that, instead of waiting to see his editor, he hurried out into the street, bent upon following Mr. Chicot the artist. The office was in one of the narrow streets northward of the Strand. If Chicot had turned to the left, he must be by this time following the strong current of the Strand, which flows westward at this hour, with its tide of human life, as regularly as the river flows to the sea. If he had turned to the right, he was most likely lost in the labyrinth between Drury Lane and Holborn. In either case—three minutes having been wasted in surprise and interrogation — there seemed little chance of catching him.

Edward turned to the right, and went towards Holborn. Accident favoured him. At the corner

of Long Acre he saw Chicot, the artist, button-holed by an older man, of somewhat raffish aspect. That Chicot was anxious to get away from the button-holer was obvious, and before Edward could reach the corner he had done so, and was off at a rapid pace westward. There would be no chance of overtaking him, except by running; and to run in Long Acre would be to make oneself unpleasantly conspicuous. There was no empty hansom within sight. Edward looked round despairingly. There stood the raffish man watching him, and looking as if he knew exactly what Mr. Clare wanted.

Edward crossed the street, looked at the raffish man, and lingered, half inclined to speak. The raffish man anticipated his desire.

‘I think you wanted my friend Chicot,’ he said, in a most insinuating tone.

He had the accent of a gentleman, and in some wise the look of a gentleman, though his degradation from that high estate was patent to every eye. His tall hat, sponged and coaxed to a factitious polish, was of an exploded shape; his coat was

the coat of to-day; his stock was twenty years old in style, and so frayed and greasy that it might have been worn ever since it first came into fashion. The hawk's eye, the iron lines about the mouth and chin, were warnings to the man's fellow-creatures. Here was a man capable of anything—a being so obviously at war with society as to be bound by no law, daunted by no penalty.

Edward Clare dimly divined that the creature belonged to the dangerous classes, but in his excellent opinion of his own cleverness deemed himself strong enough to cope with half a dozen such seedy sinners.

‘Well, yes, I did rather want to speak to him—er—about a literary matter. Does he live far from here?’

‘Five minutes’ walk. Gibber Street, Leicester Square. I’ll take you there if you like. I live in the same house.’

‘Ah, then you can tell me all about him. But it isn’t the pleasantest thing to stand and talk in an east wind. Come in and take a glass of something,’ suggested Edward, comprehending that

this shabby genteel stranger must be plied with drink.

‘Ah,’ thought Mr. Desrolles, ‘he wants something of me. This liberality is not motiveless.’

Tavern doors opened for them close at hand. They entered the refined seclusion of a jug and bottle department, and each chose the liquor he preferred—Edward sherry and soda water, the stranger a glass of brandy, ‘short.’

‘Have you known Mr. Chicot long?’ asked Edward. ‘Don’t suppose I’m actuated by impertinent curiosity. It’s a matter of business.’

‘Sir, I know when I am talking to a gentleman,’ replied Desrolles, with a stately air. ‘I was a gentleman myself once, but it’s so long ago that the world and I have forgotten it.’

He had emptied his glass by this time, and was gazing thoughtfully, almost tearfully, at the bottom of it.

‘Take another,’ said Edward.

‘I think I will. These east winds are trying to a man of my age. Have I known Jack Chicot long? Well, about a year and a half—a little less,

perhaps—but the time is of no moment, I know him well!’

And then Mr. Desrolles proceeded to give his new acquaintance considerable information as to the outer life of Mr. and Mrs. Chicot. He did not enter into the secrets of their domesticity, save to admit that Madame was fonder of the brandy bottle—a lamentable propensity in so fair a being—than she ought to be, and that Mr. Chicot was not so fond of Madame as he might be.

‘Tired of her, I suppose?’ said Edward.

‘Precisely. A woman who drinks like a fish and swears like a trooper is apt to pall upon a man, after some years of married life.’

‘Has this Chicot no other income than what he earns by his pencil?’ asked Edward.

‘Not a sou.’

‘He has not been flush of money lately—since the new year, for instance?’

‘No.’

‘There has been no change in his way of life since then?’

‘Not the slightest—except, perhaps, that he has worked harder than ever. The man is a prodigious worker. When first he came to London he had an idea of succeeding as a painter. He used to be at his easel as soon as it was light. But since the comic journals have taken him up he has done nothing but draw on the wood. He is really a very good creature. I haven’t a word to say against him.’

‘He is remarkably like a man I know,’ said Mr. Clare, musingly; ‘but of course it can’t be the same. The husband of a French dancer. No, that isn’t possible. I wish it were,’ he muttered to himself, with clenched teeth.

‘Is he like some one you know?’ interrogated Desrolles.

‘Wonderfully like, so far as I could make out in the glimpse I got of his face.’

‘Ah, those glimpses are sometimes deceptive. Is your friend residing in London?’

‘I don’t know where he is just at present. When last I saw him he was in the west of England.’

‘Ah, nice country that!’ said Desrolles, kindling with sudden eagerness. ‘Somersetshire or Devonshire way, you mean, I suppose?’

‘I mean Devonshire.’

‘Charming county—delightful scenery!’

‘Very, for your Londoner, who runs down by express train to spend a fortnight there. Not quite so lively for your son of the soil, who sees himself doomed to rot in a God-forsaken hole like Hazlehurst, the village I came from. What! you know the place!’ exclaimed Edward, for the man had given a start that betokened surprised recognition of the name.

‘I do know a village called Hazlehurst, but it’s in Wilts,’ the other answered coolly. ‘So the gentleman who resembles my friend Chicot is a native of Devonshire, and a neighbour of yours?’

‘I didn’t say he was either,’ returned Edward, who did not want to be catechised by a disreputable-looking stranger. ‘I said I had last seen him at Hazlehurst. That’s all. And now, as I’ve an appointment at five o’clock, I must wish you good afternoon.’

They both left the bar together, and went out into Long Acre, whence the wintry sunshine had departed, giving place to that dull, thick greyness which envelopes London at eventide, like a curtain.

To those who love the City, as Charles Lamb loved it, for instance, there is something comfortable even in this all-enshrouding grey, through which the lamps shine cheerfully, like friendly eyes.

‘I’m sorry I haven’t got my card case with me,’ said Desrolles, feeling in his breast pocket.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ the other answered, curtly. ‘Good day to you.’

And so they parted, Edward Clare walking swiftly away towards the little French restaurant hard by St. Ann’s Church, where he meant to solace himself with a comfortable dinner.

‘A cad!’ mused Desrolles, looking after him. ‘Provincial, and a cad! Strange that he should come from Hazlehurst.’

Mr. Clare dined entirely to his own satisfaction, and with what he considered a severe economy; for he contented himself with half a bottle of

claret, and took only one glass of green chartreuse after his small cup of black coffee. The coffee made him bright and wakeful, and he left the purlieus of St. Ann in excellent spirits. He had changed his mind about the Prince of Wales's. Instead of indulging himself with a stall at that luxurious theatre, he would rough it and go to the pit at the Prince Frederick, to see Mademoiselle Chicot. He had been haunted by her name on the walls of London, but he had never yet had the desire to see her. Now all at once his curiosity was aroused. He went, and admired the dancer, as all the world admired her. He was early enough to get a seat in the front row of the pit, and from this position could survey the stalls, which were filled with men, all declared worshippers of La Chicot. There was one squat figure—a stout dark man, with sleek black hair, and colourless Jewish face—which attracted Edward's particular attention. This man watched the dancer, from his seat at the end of a row, with an expression that differed markedly from the vacuous admiration of other countenances. In this man's

face, dull and weary as it was, there was a look that told of passion held in reserve, of a purpose to be pursued to the very end. A dangerous admirer for any woman, most of all perilous for such a woman as La Chicot.

She saw him, and recognised him, as a familiar presence in an unknown crowd. One brilliant flash of her dark eyes told as much as this, and perhaps was a sufficient reward for Joseph Lemuel's devotion. A slow smile curled his thick lips, and lost itself in the folds of his fat chin. He flung no bouquet to the dancer. He had no desire to advertise his admiration. When the curtain fell upon the brilliant tableau which ended the burlesque—a picture made up of handsome women in dazzling dresses and eccentric attitudes, lighted by the broad glare of a magnesium lamp—Edward left the pit and went round to the narrow side street on which the stage-door opened. He had an idea that the dancer's husband would be waiting to escort her home.

He waited himself in the dark chilly street for about a quarter of an hour, and then, instead of

Mr. Chicot, the artist, he saw his acquaintance at the tavern stroll slowly to the stage-door, wrapped in an ancient poncho, made of shaggy stuff, like the skin of a wild beast, and smoking a gigantic cigar. This gentleman took up his stand outside the stage-door, and waited patiently for about ten minutes while Edward Clare walked slowly up and down on the opposite pavement, which was in profound shadow.

At last La Chicot came out, a tall, commanding figure in a black silk gown, which swept the pavement, a sealskin jacket, and a little round hat set jauntily on her dark hair.

She took Desrolles' arm, as if it were an accustomed thing for him to escort her; and they went away together, she talking with considerable animation, and as loud as a lady of the highest rank.

'Curious,' thought Edward. 'Where is the husband all this time?'

The husband was spending his evening at a literary club, of somewhat Bohemian character, where there was wit to cheer the saddened soul, and where the nightly talk was of the wildest, breathing

ridicule that spared nothing between heaven and earth, and a deep scorn of fools, and an honest contempt for formalism and veneer of all kinds—for the art that follows the fashion of a day, for the literature that is made to pattern. In such a circle Jack Chicot found temporary oblivion. These riotous assemblies, this strong rush of talk, were to him as the waters of Lethe.

CHAPTER II.

SHALL IT BE 'YES' OR 'NO'?

'This looks as if he were serious, doesn't it?' asked La Chicot.

The question was addressed to Mr. Desrolles. The two were standing side by side in the wintry dusk, in front of one of the windows that looked into Cibber Street, contemplating the contents of a jewel-case, which La Chicot held open.

Embedded in the white velvet lining there lay a collet necklace of diamonds, each stone as big as a prize pea; such a necklace as Desrolles could not remember to have seen, even in the jewellers' windows, before which he had sometimes paused out of sheer idleness, to contemplate such finery.

'Serious!' he echoed. 'I told you from the first that Joseph Lemuel was a prince.'

'You don't suppose I am going to keep it?' said La Chicot.

‘I don’t suppose you, or any other woman, would send it back, if it were a free gift,’ answered Desrolles.

‘It is not a free gift. It is to be mine if I consent to run away from my husband and live in Paris as Mr. Lemuel’s mistress. I am to have a villa at Passy, and fifteen hundred a year.’

‘Princely!’ exclaimed Desrolles.

‘And I am to leave Jack free to live his own life. Don’t you think he would be glad?’

There was something almost tigerish in the look which emphasised this question.

‘I think that it would not matter one jot to you whether he were glad or sorry. He would make a row, I suppose, but you would be safe on the other side of the Channel.’

‘He would get a divorce,’ said La Chicot. ‘Your English law breaks a marriage as easily as it makes one. And then he would marry that other woman.’

‘What other woman?’

‘I don’t know—but there is another. He owned as much the last time we quarrelled.’

'A divorce would make you a great lady. Joseph Lemuel would marry you. The man is your slave; you could twist him round your little finger. And then, instead of your little box at Passy, you might have a mansion in the Champs Elysées, among the ambassadors. You could go to the races in a four-in-hand. You might be the most fashionable woman in Paris.'

'And I began life washing dirty linen in the river at Auray, among a lot of termagants who hated me because I was young and handsome. I had not much pleasure in those days, my friend.'

'Your Parisian life would be a change. You must be very tired of London.'

'Tired! But I detest it prettily, your city of narrow streets and dismal Sundays.'

'And you must have had enough dancing.'

'I begin to be tired of it. Since my accident I have not the old spirit.'

She had the jewel-case in her hand still, and was turning it about, admiring the brightness of the stones, which sparkled in the dim light. Presently she went back to her low chair by the

fire, and let the case lie open in her lap, with the fire-glow shining on the gems, until the pure white stones took all the colours of the rainbow.

‘I can fancy myself in a box at the opera, in a tight-fitting ruby velvet dress, with no ornaments but this necklace and single diamonds for eardrops,’ mused La Chicot. ‘I do not think there are many women in Paris who would surpass me.’

‘Not one.’

‘And I should look on while other women danced for my amusement,’ she pursued. ‘After all, the life of a stage dancer is a poor thing at best. There are only so many rungs of the ladder between me and a dancing girl at a fair. I am getting tired of it.’

‘You will be a good deal more tired when you are a few years older,’ said Desrolles.

‘At six and twenty one need not think of age.’

‘No ; but at six and thirty age will think of you.’

‘I have asked for a week to consider his offer,’ said La Chicot. ‘This day week I am to give him an answer, yes or no. If I keep the dia-

monds, it will mean yes. If I send them back to him, it will mean no.'

'I can't imagine any woman saying no to such a necklace as that,' said Desrolles.

'What is it worth, after all? Fifteen years ago a string of glass beads bought in the market at Auray would have made me happier than those diamonds can make me now.'

'If you are going to moralise, I can't follow you. I should say, at a rough guess, those diamonds must be worth three thousand pounds.'

'They are to be taken or left,' said La Chicot, in French, with her careless shrug.

'Where do you mean to keep them?' inquired Desrolles. 'If your husband were to see them, there would be a row. You must not leave them in his way.'

'*Pas si bête,*' replied La Chicot. 'See here.'

She flung back the loose collar of her cashmere morning gown, and clasped the necklace round her throat. Then she drew the collar together again, and the diamonds were hidden.

'I shall wear the necklace night and day till I

make up my mind whether to keep it or not,' she said. 'Where I go the diamonds will go—nobody will see them—nobody will rob me of them while I am alive. What is the matter?' she asked suddenly, startled by a passing distortion of Desrolles' face.

'Nothing. Only a spasm.'

'I thought you were going to have a fit.'

'I did feel queer for the moment. My old complaint.'

'Ah, I thought as much. Have some brandy.'

Though La Chicot made light of Mr. Lemuel's offering in her talk with Desrolles, she was not the less impressed by it. After she had come from the theatre that night she sat on the floor in her dingy bedroom with a looking-glass in her hand, gloating over her reflection with that string of jewels round her neck, turning her swan-like throat every way to catch the rays of the candle, thinking how glorious she would look with those shining stars upon her ivory neck, thinking what a new and delightful life Joseph Lemuel's wealth could give her; a life of riot and dissipation, fine

clothes, epicurean dinners, late hours, and perfect idleness. She even thought of all the famous restaurants in Paris where she would like to dine; fairy palaces on the Boulevard, all lights, and gilding, and crimson velvet, which she knew only from the outside; houses where vice was more at home than virtue, and where a single cutlet in its paper frill cost more than a poor man's family dinner. She looked round the shabby room, with its blackened ceiling and discoloured paper, on which the damp had made ugly blotches; the tawdry curtains, the rickety deal dressing-table disguised in dirty muslin and ragged Nottingham lace—and the threadbare carpet. How miserable it all was! She and her husband had once gone with the crowd to see the house of a Parisian courtesan, who had died in the zenith of her days. She remembered with what almost reverential feeling the mob had gazed at the delicate satin draperies of boudoir and salon, the porcelain, the tapestries, the antique lace, the tiny cabinet pictures which shone like jewels on the satin walls. Vice so exalted was almost virtue.

In the dining-room, paramount over all other objects, was enshrined the portrait of the departed goddess, a medallion in a frame of velvet and gold. La Chicot well remembered wondering to see so little beauty in that celebrated face—a small oval face, grey eyes, a nondescript nose, a wide mouth. Intelligence and a winning smile were the only charms of that renowned beauty. Cosmetics and Wörth had done all the rest. But then the dead and gone courtesan had been one of the cleverest women in France. La Chicot made no allowance for that.

‘I am ten times handsomer,’ she told herself, ‘and yet I shall never keep my own carriage.’

She had often brooded over the difference between her fate and that of the woman whose house, and horses, and carriages, and lap dogs, and jewels she had seen, the sale of which had made a nine days’ wonder in Paris. She thought of that dead woman to-night as she sat with the mirror in her hand admiring the diamonds and her beauty, while Jack Chicot was doing his best to forget her in his Bohemian club near the

Strand. She remembered all the stories she had heard of that extinguished luminary—her arrogance, her extravagance, the abject slavery of her adorers, her triumphal progress through life, scornful and admired.

It was not the virtuous who despised her, but she who despised the virtuous. Honest women were the chosen mark for her ridicule. People in Paris knew all the details of her brazen, infamous life. Very few knew the history of her deathbed. But the priest who shrived her and the nursing sister who watched her last hours could have told a story to make even Frivolity's hair stand on end.

'It was a short life, but a merry one,' thought La Chicot. 'How well I remember her the winter the lake in the Bois was frozen, and there was skating by torchlight! She used to drive a sledge covered all over with silver bells, and she used to skate dressed in dark red velvet and sable. The crowd stood on one side to let her pass, as if she had been an empress.'

Then her thoughts took another turn.

‘If I left him, he would divorce me and marry that other woman,’ she said to herself. ‘Who is she, I wonder? Where did he see her? Not at the theatre. He cares for no one there. I have watched him too closely to be deceived in that.’

Then she half filled a tumbler with brandy, and flavoured it with water, in order to delude herself with the idea that she was drinking brandy and water; and then, lapsing into a state of semi-intoxication—a dreamy, half-consciousness, in which life, seen hazily, took a brighter hue—she flung aside her mirror, and threw herself half-dressed upon the bed.

Jack Chicot, who had taken to coming home long after midnight, slept on a sofa in the little third room, where he worked. There was not much chance of his seeing the jewels. He and his wife were as nearly parted as two people could be, living in the same house.

La Chicot contemplated the diamonds, and abandoned herself to much the same train of thought, for several nights; and now came the last night of the week which Mr. Lemuel had

allowed for reflection. To-morrow she was to give him his answer.

He was waiting for her at the stage-door when she came out. Desrolles, her usual escort, was not in attendance.

‘Zaire I have been thinking of you every hour since last we spoke together,’ Joseph Lemuel began, delighted at finding her alone. ‘You are as difficult to approach as a princess of the blood royal.’

‘Why should I hold myself cheaper than a princess ?’ she asked, insolently. ‘I am an honest woman.’

‘You are handsomer than any princess in Europe,’ he said. ‘But you ought to compassionate an adorer who has waited so long and so patiently. When am I to have your answer ? Is it to be yes ? You cannot be so cruel as to say no. My lawyer has drawn up the deed of settlement. I only wait your word to execute it.’

‘You are very generous,’ said La Chicot, scornfully, ‘or very obstinate. If I run away with you and my husband gets a divorce, will you marry me ?’

‘Be faithful to me, and I will refuse you nothing.’ He went with her to the door of her lodgings for the first time, pleading his cause all the way, with such eloquence as he could command, which was not much. He was a man who had found money all powerful to obtain everything he wanted, and had seldom felt the need of words.

‘Send me a messenger you can trust at twelve o’clock to-morrow, and if I do not send you back your diamonds——’

‘I shall know that your answer is yes. In that case you will find my brougham waiting at a quarter-past seven o’clock to-morrow evening, at the corner of this street, and I shall be in the brougham. We will drive straight to Charing Cross, and start for Paris by the mail. It will be too dark for any one to notice the carriage. What time do you generally go to the theatre?’

‘At half-past seven.’

‘Then you will not be missed till you are well out of the way. There will be no fuss, no scandal.’

‘There will be a tremendous fuss at the theatre,’

said La Chicot. 'Who is to take my place in the burlesque?'

'Any one. What need you care? You will have done with burlesque and the stage for ever.'

'True,' said La Chicot.

And then she remembered the Student's Theatre in Paris, and how her popularity had waned there. The same thing might happen here in London, perhaps, after a year or two. Her audience would grow tired of her. Already people in the theatre had begun to make disagreeable remarks about the empty champagne bottles which came out of her dressing-room. By-and-bye, perhaps, they would be impudent enough to call her a drunkard. She would be glad to have done with them.

Yet, degraded as she was, there were depths of vice from which her better instincts plucked her back; as if it were her good angel clutching her garments to drag her from the edge of an abyss. She had once loved her husband; nay, after her own manner, she loved him still, and could not calmly contemplate leaving him. Her

brain, muddled by champagne and brandy, shaped all thoughts confusedly; yet at her worst the idea of selling herself to this Jewish profligate shocked and disgusted her. Her soul was swayed to and fro, to this side and to that. She had no inclination to vice, but she would have liked the wages of sin; for in this lower world the wages of sin meant a villa at Passy, and a couple of carriages.

‘Good night,’ she said abruptly to her lover. ‘I must not be seen talking to you. My husband may come home at any minute.’

‘I hear that he generally comes home in the middle of the night,’ said Mr. Lemuel.

‘What business is it of yours if he does?’ asked La Chicot, angrily.

‘Everything that concerns you is my business. When I, who love the ground you walk upon, hear how you are neglected by your husband, do you suppose the knowledge does not make me so much the more determined to win you?’

‘Send your messenger for my answer to-morrow,’ said La Chicot, and then she shut the door in his face.

‘I hate him,’ she muttered when she was alone in the passage, stamping her foot as if she had trodden upon a venomous insect.

She went upstairs, and again sat down half-undressed upon the floor, to look at the diamond necklace. She had a childish love of the gems—a delight in looking at them—which differed very little from her feelings when she was fifteen years younger, and longed for a blue bead necklace exposed for sale in the quaint old market place at Auray.

‘I shall send them back to him to-morrow,’ she said to herself. ‘The diamonds are beautiful—and I am getting tired of my life here, and I know that Jack hates me—but that man is too horrible—and—I am an honest woman.’

She flung herself on her knees beside the bed, in the attitude of prayer, but not to pray. She had lost the habit of prayer soon after she left her native province. She was sobbing passionately for the loss of her husband’s love, with a dim consciousness that it was by her own degradation she had forfeited his regard.

‘I’ve been a good wife to him,” she murmured in broken syllables, ‘better than ever I was——’

And then speech lost itself in convulsive sobs, and she cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER III.

MURDER.

MURDER! an awful word under the most ordinary circumstances of every-day life—an awful word even when spoken of an event that happened long ago, or afar off. But what a word shouted in the dead of night, through the close darkness of a sleeping house, thrilling the ear of slumber, freezing the blood in the half-awakened sleepers' veins.

Such a shout—repeated with passionate clamour—scared the inhabitants of the Cibber Street lodging-house at three o'clock in the winter morning, still dark as deepest night. Mrs. Rawber heard it in her back bedroom on the ground floor. It penetrated confusedly—not as a word, but as a sound of fear and dread—to the front kitchen, where Mrs. Evitt, the landlady, slept on an ancient press bedstead, which by day made believe to be a bookcase. Lastly, Desrolles, who seemed to have slept more

heavily than the other two on that particular night, came rushing out of his room to ask the meaning of that hideous summons.

They all met on the first-floor landing, where Jack Chicot stood on the threshold of his wife's bedroom, with a candle in his hand, the flickering flame making a patch of sickly yellow light amidst surrounding gloom—a faint light in which Jack Chicot's pallid countenance looked like the face of a ghost.

‘What is the matter?’ Desrolles asked the two women simultaneously.

‘My wife has been murdered. My God, it is too awful! See—see——’

Chicot pointed with a trembling hand to a thin thread of crimson that had crept along the dull grey carpet to the very threshold. Shudderingly the others looked inside, as he held the candle towards the bed, with white averted face. There were hideous stains on the counterpane, an awful figure lying in a heap among the bed-clothes, a long loose coil of raven hair, curved like a snake round the rigid form—a spectacle

which not one of those who gazed upon it, spell-bound, fascinated by the horror of the sight, could ever hope to forget.

‘Murdered, and in my house!’ shrieked Mrs. Evitt, unconsciously echoing the words of Lady Macbeth, on a similar occasion. ‘I shall never let my first floor again. I’m a ruined woman. Seize him, ‘old ‘im tight,’ she cried, with sudden intensity. ‘It must ‘ave been her ‘usband done it. You was often a-quarrelling, you know you was.’

This fierce attack startled Jack Chicot. He turned upon the woman with his ghastly face, a new horror in his eyes.

‘I kill her!’ he cried. ‘I never raised my hand against her in my life, though she has tempted me many a time. I came into the house three minutes ago. I should not have known anything, for when I come in late I sleep in the little room, but I saw that——(he pointed to the thin red streak which had crept across the threshold, and under the door, to the carpetless landing outside), ‘and then I came in and found her lying here, as you see her.’

‘Somebody ought to go for a policeman,’ suggested Desrolles.

‘I will,’ said Chicot.

He was the only person present in a condition to leave the house, and before any one could question his right to leave it he was gone.

They waited outside that awful chamber for a quarter of an hour, but no policeman came, nor did Jack Chicot return.

‘I begin to think he has made a bolt of it,’ said Desrolles. ‘That looks rather bad.’

‘Didn’t I tell you he’d done it?’ screamed the landlady. ‘I know he’d got to hate her. I’ve seen it in his looks—and she has told me as much, and cried over it, poor thing, when she’d taken a glass or two more than was good for her. And you let him go, like a coward as you was.’

‘My good Mrs. Evitt, you are getting abusive. I was not sent into the world to arrest possible criminals. I am not a detective.’

‘But I’m a ruined woman!’ cried the outraged householder. ‘Who’s to occupy my lodgings in future, I should like to know? The house’ll get

the name of being haunted. Here's Mrs. Rawber even, that has been with me close upon five year, will be wanting to go.'

'I've had a turn,' assented the tragic lady, 'and I don't feel that I can lie down in my bed again downstairs. I'm afraid I may have to look for other apartments.'

'There,' whimpered Mrs. Evitt, 'didn't I tell you I was a ruined woman?'

Desrolles had gone into the front room, and was standing at an open window watching for a policeman.

One of those guardians of the public peace came strolling along the pavement presently, with as placid an air as if he had been an inhabitant of Arcadia, to whom Desrolles shouted, 'Come up here, there's been murder.'

The public guardian wheeled himself stiffly round and approached the street door. He did not take the word murder in its positive sense, but in its local significance, which meant a row, culminating in a few bruises and a black eye or two. That actual murder had been done, and

that a dead woman was lying in the house, never entered his mind. He opened the door and came upstairs with slow, creaking footsteps, as if he had been making a ceremonious visit.

‘What’s the row?’ he asked curtly, when he came to the first-floor landing, and saw the two women standing there, Mrs. Evitt wrapped in a waterproof, Mrs. Rawber in a yellow cotton dressing-gown of antiquated fashion, both with scared faces and sparse dishevelled hair.

Mr. Desrolles was the coolest of the trio, but even his countenance had a ghastly look in the light of the guttering candle which Jack Chicot had set down on the little table outside the bedroom door.

They told him, breathlessly, what had happened.

‘Is she dead?’ he asked.

‘Go in and look,’ said Mrs. Evitt. ‘I dared not go a-nigh her.’

The policeman went in, lantern in hand, a monument of stolid calm, amidst the terror of the scene. Little need to ask if she were dead. That awful face upon the pillow, those glazed eyes

with their wide stare of horror, that gaping wound in the full white throat, from which the life-blood had poured in a crimson stream across the white counterpane, until it made a dark pool beside the bed, all told their own tale.

‘She must have been dead for an hour or more,’ said the policeman, touching the marble hand.

La Chicot’s hand and arm were flung above her head, as if she had known what was coming, and had tried to clutch the bell-pull behind her. The other hand was tightly clenched as in the last convulsion.

‘There ’ll have to be an inquest,’ said the policeman, after he had examined the window, and looked out to see if the room was easily accessible from without. ‘Somebody had better go for a doctor. I’ll go myself. There’s a surgeon at the corner of the next street. Who is she, and how did it happen?’

Mrs. Evitt, in a torrent of words, told him all she knew, and all she suspected. It was La Chicot’s husband that had done it, she was sure.

‘Why?’ asked the policeman.

‘Who else should it be? It couldn’t be burglars. You saw yourself that the window was fastened inside. She’d no valuables to tempt any one. Light come light go was her motto, poor thing. Her money went as fast as it came, and if it wasn’t him as did it, why haven’t he come back?’

The policeman asked what she meant by this, whereupon Desrolles told him of Mr. Chicot’s disappearance.

‘I must say that it looks fishy,’ concluded the second-floor lodger. ‘I don’t want to breathe a word against a man I like, but it looks fishy. He went out twenty minutes ago to fetch a policeman, and he hasn’t come back yet.’

‘No, nor never will,’ said Mrs. Rawber, who was sitting on the stairs shivering, afraid to go back to her bedroom.

That ground-floor bedroom of hers was a dismal place at the best of times, overshadowed by the wall of the yard, and made dark and damp by a protruding cistern, but how would it seem

to her now when the house was made horrible by murder?

‘Do you know what time it was when the husband gave the alarm?’ asked the policeman.

‘Not more than twenty minutes ago.’

‘Any of you got a watch?’

Desrolles shrugged his shoulders. Mrs. Evitt murmured something about her poor husband’s watch which had been a good one in its time, till one of the hands broke short off and the works went wrong. Mrs. Rawber had a clock on her bedroom mantel-piece, and had noticed the time when that awful cry awoke her, scared as she was. It was ten minutes after three.

‘And now it wants twenty to four,’ said the sergeant, looking at his watch. ‘If the husband did it, he must have done it a good hour before he gave the alarm; at least that’s my opinion. We shall hear what the doctor says. I’ll go and fetch him. Now, look here, my good people: if you value your own characters, you’ll none of you attempt to leave this house to-night. Your evidence will be wanted at the inquest to-morrow, and the quieter

and closer you keep yourselves meanwhile the safer for you.'

'I shall go back to bed,' said Desrolles, 'as I don't see my way to being of any use.'

'That's the best thing you can do,' said the sergeant, approvingly; 'and you, ma'am,' he added, turning to Mrs. Rawber, 'had better follow the gentleman's example.'

Mrs. Rawber felt as if her bedroom would be peopled with ghosts, but did not like to give utterance to her fears.

'I'll go down and set alight to my parlour fire, and mix myself a wine-glass full of something warm,' she said. 'I feel chilled to the marrow of my bones.'

'You, ma'am, had better wait up here till I come back with the doctor,' said the policeman.

Desrolles had returned to his room by this time. Mrs. Rawber went downstairs with the policeman, glad of his company so far. He waited politely while she struck a lucifer and lighted her candle, and then he hurried off to find the doctor.

'There's company in a fire,' mused Mrs. Rawber,

as she groped for wood and paper in the bottom of a cupboard not wholly innocent of black-beetles.

There was company in a glass of hot gin-and-water, too, by-and-bye, when the tiny kettle had been coaxed into a boil. Mrs. Rawber was a temperate woman, but she liked what she called her 'little comforts,' and an occasional tumbler of gin-and-water was one of them.

'It's very hard upon me,' she said to herself, thinking of the dreadful deed that had been done upstairs: 'the rooms suit me, and I'm used to them; and yet I believe I shall have to go. I shall fancy the place is haunted.'

She glanced round over her shoulders, fearful lest she should see La Chicot in her awful beauty—a marble face, a blood-stained throat, and glassy eyes regarding her with a sightless stare.

'I shall have to leave,' thought Mrs. Rawber.

Meanwhile Mrs. Evitt was alone upstairs. She was a ghoulish woman, for whom horrors were not without a ghastly relish. She liked to visit in the house of death, to sit beside the winter fire with a batch of gossips, consuming tea and toast, dwelling

on the details of a last illness, or discussing the order of a funeral. She had a dreadful courage that came of familiarity with death. She took up the candle, and went in alone and unappalled to look at La Chicot.

‘How tight that hand is clenched,’ she said to herself; ‘I wonder whether there’s anything in it.’

She forced back the stiffening fingers, and with the candle held close, bent down to peer into the marble palm. In the hollow of that dead hand she found a little tuft of iron-grey hair, which looked as if it had been torn from a man’s head.

Mrs. Evitt drew the hairs from the dead hand, and with a careful precision laid them in an old letter which she took from her pocket, and folded up the letter into a neat little packet, which she returned to the same calico receptacle for heterogeneous articles.

‘What a turn it has given me,’ she said to herself, stealing back to the landing, her petticoats lifted, lest the hem of her garments should touch that dreadful pool beside the bed.

The expression of her face had altered since she

entered the room. There was a new intelligence in her dull grey eyes. Her countenance and bearing were as of one whose mind is charged with the weight of an awful secret.

The surgeon came, an elderly man, who lived close at hand, and was experienced in the ways of that doubtful section of society which inhabited the neighbourhood of Cibber Street. In his opinion La Chicot had been dead three hours. It was now on the stroke of four. One o'clock must, therefore, have been the time of the murder.

The police-sergeant came back in company with a man in plain clothes, and these two made a careful examination of the premises together, the result of which inspection went to show that it would have been extremely difficult for any one to enter the house from the back. The front door was left on the latch all night, and had been for the last eleven years, and no harm had ever come of it, Mrs. Evitt declared, plaintively. It was a Chubb lock, and she didn't believe there was another like it in all London.

The two men went into every room in the house,

disturbed Mr. Desrolles in a comfortable slumber, and surveyed his bedchamber with eyes which took in every detail. There was very little for them to see: a tent bedstead draped with flabby faded chintz, a rickety washstand, a small chest of drawers with a looking glass on the top, and three odd chairs, picked up at humble auctions.

After inspecting Mr. Desrolles' rooms, and overhauling his limited wardrobe, they looked in upon Mrs. Rawber, and roused that talented woman's ire by opening all her drawers and cupboards, and peering curiously into the same, whereby they beheld more mysteries of theatrical attire than ought to be seen by the public eye.

'You don't suppose I did it, I hope,' protested Mrs. Rawber, in her grandest tragedy voice.

'No, ma'am, but we're obliged to do our duty,' answered the police-officer. 'It's only a form.'

'It's a very disagreeable form,' said Mrs. Rawber, 'and if you tallow-grease my Lady Macbeth dresses, I shall expect you to make them good.'

The man in plain clothes committed himself to no opinion, nor did he enter upon any discussion as

to the motive of a crime apparently so motiveless. He made his notes of the plain facts of the case, and went away with the sergeant.

‘What am I to do about laying her out,’ asked Mrs. Evitt of the doctor. ‘I wouldn’t lay a finger upon her for a hundred pounds.’

‘I’ll send round a nurse from the workhouse,’ said the doctor, after a moment’s thought. ‘They’re not easily scared.’

Half an hour later the workhouse nurse came, a tall, bony woman, who executed her horrible task in a business-like manner, which testified to the strength of her nerve and the variety of her experience.

By five o’clock in the morning all was done, and La Chicot lay with meekly folded hands under clean white linen—the heavy lids closed for ever on the once lovely eyes, the raven hair parted on the classic brow.

‘She’s the handsomest corpse I’ve laid out for the last ten years,’ said the nurse, ‘and I think she does me credit. If you’ve got a kettle on the bile, mum, and can give me a cup of tea, I shall

be thankful for it; and I think a teaspoonful of sperrits in it would do me good. I've been up all night with a fractious pauper in the smallpox ward.'

'Oh, lor!' cried Mrs. Evitt, with an alarmed countenance.

'You've been vaccinated, of course, mum,' said the nurse cheerfully. 'You don't belong to none of them radical anti-vaccinationists, I'm sure. And as to catching complaints of that kind, mum, it's only your pore-spirited, nervous people as does it. I never have no pity for such weak mortals. I look down on 'em too much.'

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT THE DIAMONDS WERE WORTH.

THE inquest was held at noon next day. The news of the murder had spread far and wide already, and there was a crowd gathered round the house in Cibber Street all the morning, much to Mrs. Evitt's aggravation. The newspaper reporters forced their way into her house in defiance of her protests, and finding her slow to answer their questions, got hold of Mr. Desrolles, who was very ready to talk and to drink with every comer.

George Gerard called at the house in Cibber Street between nine and ten o'clock. He had heard of the murder on his way from the Blackfriars Road, where he was now living as assistant to a general practitioner, to the hospital where he was still attending the clinical lectures. He had heard an exaggerated version of the event, and

came expecting to find a case of murder and suicide, the husband stretched lifeless beside the wife he had sacrificed to his jealous fury.

It was not without some difficulty that he got permission to enter the room where the dead woman lay. The hospital nurse had been put in charge of that chamber by the police, and Gerard was obliged to enforce his arguments with a half-crown, which he could ill afford, before the lady's conscientious scruples were quieted, and she gave him the key of the room.

He went in with the nurse, and stayed for about a quarter of an hour, engaged in a careful and thoughtful examination of the wound. It was a curious wound. La Chicot's throat had not been cut, in the common acceptation of the phrase. The blow that had slain her was a deep stab; a violent thrust with some sharp, thin, and narrow instrument, which had pierced the hollow of her neck, and penetrated in a slanting direction to the lungs.

What had been the instrument? Was it a dagger? and, if so, what kind of dagger? George

Gerard had never seen a dagger thin enough to inflict that fine narrow slit through which the blood had oozed so slowly. The crimson stream that stained coverlet and floor had flowed from the livid lips of the corpse, betokening hæmorrhage of the lungs.

There had been a struggle before that fatal wound was given. On the round, white wrist of the dead a purple bruise showed where a savage hand had gripped that lovely arm; on the right shoulder, from which the loose night-dress had fallen, appeared the marks of strong fingers that had fastened their clutch there. The nurse showed Gerard these bruises.

‘They tell a tale, don’t they?’ she said.

‘If we could only read it aright,’ sighed Gerard.

‘It looks as if she had fought for her life, poor soul,’ suggested the nurse.

Gerard made no further remark, but stood beside the bed, looking round him with thoughtful scrutinizing gaze, as if he would have asked the very walls to tell him the secret of the crime they had looked upon a few hours before.

‘The police have been here and have discovered nothing?’ he said, interrogatively.

‘Whatever they’ve discovered they’ve kept to themselves,’ answered the nurse, ‘but I don’t believe it’s much.’

‘Did they go in there?’ asked Gerard, pointing to the open door of that small inner room, a mere den, where Jack Chicot had painted in the days when he cherished the hope of earning his living as a painter. Here of late he had drawn his woodblocks, and here, on a wretched narrow couch, he had slept.

‘Yes, they went in,’ replied the nurse, ‘but I’m sure they didn’t find anything particular there.’

Gerard passed into the dusty little den. There was an old easel with an unfinished picture, half covered with a ragged chintz curtain. Gerard plucked the curtain aside, and looked at the picture. It was crude, but full of a certain melodramatic power. The subject was from a poem of De Musset’s, a Venetian noble, crouching in the shadow of a doorway, at dead of night, dagger in hand, waiting to slay his enemy. There was a deal table, ink-

stained, decrepid, scattered with papers, pens, pencils, a battered pewter inkstand, an empty cigar-box, a file of 'Folly as it Flies,' and odd numbers of other comic journals. On the old-fashioned window-seat—for these houses in Cibber Street were two hundred years old—there was a large wooden paint box, full of empty tubes, brushes, a couple of palettes, an old palette-knife, rags, sponges. At the bottom of the box, hidden under rags and rubbish, there lay a long thin dagger, of Italian workmanship, the handle of finely wrought silver, oxydised with age, just such a dagger as an artist would fancy for his armoury. One glance at the canvas yonder told Gerard that this was the dagger in the picture.

George Gerard took up the dagger and looked at it curiously—a long thin blade, flexible, sharp, a deadly weapon in a strong hand, a weapon to inflict just such a wound as that deep stab which had slain La Chicot.

He examined the blade, the handle—looking at both through his pocket microscope. Both were darkly tarnished, possibly with the recent stain of

blood ; but the weapon had been carefully cleansed, and there was no actual speck of blood upon either handle or blade.

‘Strange that the detectives should have overlooked this,’ he said to himself, replacing the dagger in the box.

Mrs. Evitt had told him of Jack Chicot’s unaccountable disappearance, how he had gone out to call the police, and had never come back. What could this mean, except guilt? And here in the husband’s colour box was just such a weapon as that with which the wife had been stabbed.

‘And I know that he was weary of her, I know that he wanted her to die,’ mused Gerard. ‘I read that secret in his face six months ago.’

He left the room presently, without any expression of opinion to the hospital nurse, who was eager to discuss the deed that had been done, and had theories of her own about it. He left the house and walked the neighbouring streets for an hour, waiting for the inquest.

‘Shall I volunteer my opinion before the Coroner?’ he asked himself, ‘To what end? It

is but a theory, after all. And a Coroner is rarely a man inclined to give his ear to speculations of that kind. I'd better write to one of the newspapers. Would it do any good if I were to bring the crime home to the husband? Not much, perhaps. Wherever the wretch goes he carries with him a conscience that must be a worse punishment than the condemned cell. And to hang him would not bring her back to life. Poor, foolish, lost creature, the only woman I ever loved.'

The Prince of Wales's Feathers—more popularly known as the Feathers—a publichouse at the corner of Cibber-street and Woodpecker-court, was the scene of the inquiry. The witnesses were the doctor, the police-sergeant, the detective who had assisted in the examination of the premises, Desrolles, Mrs. Evitt, and Mrs. Rawber. Jack Chicot, the most important witness of all, had not been seen since he left the house under the pretence of summoning the police. This disappearance of the husband, after giving an alarm which roused the sleeping household—an altogether unnecessary and foolish act, supposing him to be the murderer

—was the most remarkable feature in the case, and puzzled the Coroner.

He questioned Mrs. Evitt closely as to the habits of the dancer and her husband.

‘You say they quarrelled frequently,’ he said. ‘Were their disputes of a violent character?’

‘I have heard her violent, but never him. She was very fond of him, poor thing; though she wasn’t a woman to give way or to be guided by a husband. She was fonder of drink than she ought to be, and he tried to keep her from it, leastways, when they first came to my house. Later he seemed to have give her up, as you may say, and let her go her own way.’

‘Did he seem attached to her?’

‘Not to my fancy. I thought the love was all on her side.’

‘Was he a man of violent temper?’

‘No; he was one that took things very quiet. I used to think there was something underhand in his character. I can call to mind her saying to me once, after they had been quarrelling, ‘Mrs. Evitt, that man hates me too much to

strike me. If he was once to give way to his temper he'd be the death of me.' Those words of hers made an impression upon me at the time——'

'Come, come,' interrupted the Coroner, 'we can't hear anything about your impressions. This isn't evidence,' but Mrs. Evitt's slow speech flowed onward like a tranquil stream meandering through a valley.

"'I'd rather have a low brute that beat me black and blue,'" she said to me another time, poor dear thing, "'if he was sorry for it afterwards, than a cold-hearted gentleman that can sting me to death with a word.'"

'I want to hear facts, not assertions,' said the Coroner, impatiently. 'Did you ever know the husband of the deceased to be guilty of any act of violence, either towards his wife or any one else?'

'Never.'

'Do you know if Madame Chicot had money or any other valuables in her possession?'

'I should say she had neither. She was a woman of extravagant habits. It wasn't in her to save money.'

Mrs. Rawber's evidence merely confirmed Mrs. Evitt as to the hour at which they had been aroused, and the conduct of Jack Chicot. The two women agreed as to the ghastly look of his face, and the sudden eagerness with which he had caught at the idea of going to fetch a policeman, an idea suggested by Desrolles.

Desrolles was the last witness examined. As he stood up to answer the Coroner, he caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd near the door-way. It was the countenance of Joseph Lemuel, the stock-broker, sorely changed since Desrolles had seen it last. Close by Mr. Lemuel's side appeared a well-known criminal lawyer. Desrolles' bister complexion grew a shade grayer at sight of these two faces, both intently watchful.

The evidence of Desrolles threw no new light upon the mystery. He had known Mr. Chicot and his wife intimately—rarely had passed a day without seeing them. They were both excellent creatures, but not suited to each other. They did not live happily together. He had never seen Jack Chicot guilty of any act of absolute violence towards his

wife, but he believed that there was a good deal of bitterness in his mind, in short that they could not have gone on living together peaceably much longer. Mr. Chicot had absented himself from home very much of late. He had kept late hours, and avoided his wife's company. In a word, it was an ill-assorted marriage, and they were a very unhappy couple—much to be pitied, both.

This was all. The Coroner adjourned the inquiry for a week, in the hope that further evidence would be forthcoming. There was a feeling in the court that a very strong suspicion attached to the dead woman's husband, and that if he did not turn up speedily he would have to be looked for.

George Gerard watched the inquest from a crowded corner of the room, but he held his peace as to that discovery of the dagger in Jack Chicot's colour-box.

La Chicot was buried two days afterwards, and there was a tremendous crowd at Kensal Green to see the foreign dancing woman laid in her untimely grave. Mr. Smolendo, with his own hands, placed a wreath of white camellias on the coffin.

Desrolles stood beside the grave, decently attired in a suit of black, hired for the occasion from a dealer in cast-off clothes, and 'looking quite the gentleman,' Mrs. Evitt said to her gossips afterwards. Mrs. Evitt and Mrs. Rawber were both at the funeral; indeed, it may be said that the whole of Cibber Street turned out for the occasion. There had not been such a crowd since the burial of Cardinal Wiseman. All the company from the Prince Frederick was there, besides much more of dramatic and equestrian London.

Poor Mr. Smolendo was in the depth of despair. He had found an all-accomplished lady to take La Chicot's place in the burlesque; but the public did not believe in the all-accomplished lady—who was old enough to have been La Chicot's mother—and Mr. Smolendo saw his theatre a desert of empty benches. No matter that his scenery, his ballet, his orchestra, his lime-lights were the best and most costly in London. The public had run after La Chicot, and her unhappy fate cast a gloom over the house, not easily to be dispersed. The tide of fashion rolled away to other theatres; and the bark that carried Mr. Smolendo's fortunes was left stranded on the shore.

The press was very vehement upon the case of La Chicot. The more popular of the penny dailies went into convulsions of indignation against everybody concerned. They reviled the Coroner; they denounced the surgeon as a simpleton; they insinuated dark things about the landlady; they branded the witnesses as perjurers; but they reserved their most scathing denunciations for the police.

Here was an atrocious murder committed in the very heart of civilized London; in the midst of a calmly slumbering household; in a house in which almost every room was occupied; and yet the murderer is suffered to escape, and yet no ray of light from the combined intelligence of Scotland Yard pierces the gloom of the mystery.

The husband of the victim, against whom there is the strongest presumptive evidence, whose own conduct is all-sufficient to condemn him, this wretch is suffered to roam at large over the earth, a modern Cain, without the brand upon his brow by which his fellow-men may know him. Perhaps at this very hour he is haunting our taverns, dining at our restaurants, polluting the innocent

atmosphere of our theatres, a guilty creature sitting at a play—nay, even, with the hypocrite's visage, crossing the hallowed threshold of a church! Where are the police? What are they doing that this scoundrel has not been found? They should be able to recognise him at a glance, even without the brand of Cain. Are there no photographs of the monster, who has been described as good-looking, and who was doubtless vain? Letters pour in to the Morning Shrieker by the bushel, every correspondent suggesting his own particular and original method for catching a murderer.

Strange to say, Jack Chicot, although a fair subject for the camera, has had no passion for seeing what kind of picture the sun can make of him. At any rate, there is no portrait of him, large or small, good, bad, or indifferent to be found in Cibber Street, where the police naturally came to look for one. Mr. Desrolles, who, throughout the case, shows himself accommodating without being officious, gives a graphic description of his late fellow lodger; but no verbal picture ever yet conjured up the image of a man, and the detectives

leave Cibber Street possessed of the idea of a personage no more like Jack Chicot than Jack Chicot was like the Emperor of China. This imaginary Chicot they hunt assiduously in all the worst parts of London, and often seem on the brink of catching him. They watch him dining at low eating-houses, they see him playing billiards in dubious taverns, they follow him on to penny steamers, and accompany him on railroad journeys, always to find that, although sufficiently disreputable, he is not Jack Chicot.

Working thus conscientiously, it was hard to be girded at by the Morning Shrieker, and an army of letter-writers.

Assuredly the evidence against the missing husband was strong enough to weave the rope that should hang him.

A letter to the *Times* from George Gerard describing the dagger found in the colour box had attracted the attention of the famous surgeon who set La Chicot's broken leg, and that gentleman had hurried at once to Cibber Street to examine the wound. He afterwards saw the dagger which, with the rest of the missing man's effects, was

in the custody of the police. He wrote to the *Times* next day, confirming Gerard's statement. Such a wound could have been inflicted by just such a dagger, and hardly by any other form of knife or dagger known to civilization. The thin flexible blade was unlike the blade of any other dagger the surgeon had ever seen—the wound corresponded to the form of the blade.

The leader-writers on the popular journals took up the idea. They depicted the whole scene as vividly as if it had been shown to them in a charmed sleep. They gushed as they described the beauty of the wife; they wept as they told of her intemperate habits. The husband they painted in the darkest dyes of iniquity. A man who had battered on his wife's earnings—a poor creature—a led captain—idle, luxurious, intemperate, since it was doubtless his example which had taught that glorious creature to drink. They painted, in a blaze of lurid light, the scene of the murder. The husband's midnight return from haunts of vice—the wife's recriminations—her natural outbreak of jealousy—hot words on both sides. The husband

brutalised by drink, stung to fury by the wife's well-merited reproaches, snatches the dagger from the table where he had lately flung it after a desultory half-hour of labour, and plunges the blade into his wife's bosom. The leader writer saw the whole thing, as in a picture. The public read, and at street corners and on the roofs of omnibuses the public talk for the next three weeks was of Jack Chicot's crime, and the miserable stupidity of the police in not being able to find him.

* * * * *

Between eight and nine o'clock on the night after La Chicot's funeral an elderly man called upon Mr. Mosheh, a diamond merchant in a small way, who lived in one of the streets near Brunswick Square. The gentleman was respectably clad in a long overcoat, and wore a grey beard which had been allowed to grow with a luxuriance that entirely concealed the lower part of his face. Under his soft felt hat he wore a black velvet skull cap, below which there appeared no vestige of hair; whereby it might be inferred that the velvet cap was intended to hide the baldness of

the skull it covered. Under the rim of the cap, which was drawn low upon the brow, appeared a pair of shaggy grey eyebrows, shadowing prominent eyes. Mr. Mosheh came out of his dining room, whence the savoury odour of fish fried in purest olive oil followed him like a kind of incense, and found the stranger waiting for him in the front room, which was half parlour half office.

The diamond merchant had a sharp eye for character, and he saw at a glance that his visitor belonged to the hawk rather than to the pigeon family.

‘Wants to do me if he can,’ he said to himself.

‘What can I do for you?’ he asked, with oily affability.

‘You buy diamonds, I want to sell some; and as I sell them under the pressure of peculiar circumstances I am prepared to let you have them a bargain,’ said the stranger, with a tone at once friendly and business-like.

‘I don’t believe in bargains. I’ll give you a fair price for a good article, if you came by the

things honestly,' replied Mr. Mosheh, with a suspicious look. 'I am not a receiver of stolen goods. You have come to the wrong shop for that.'

'If I'd thought you were I shouldn't have come here,' said the grey-bearded old man. 'I want to deal with a gentleman. I am a gentleman myself, though a decayed one. I have not come on my own business, but on that of a friend, a man you know by name and repute as well as you know the Prince of Wales—a man carrying on one of the most successful businesses in London. I'm not going to tell you his name. I only give you the facts. My friend has bills coming due to-morrow. If they are dishonoured he must be in the *Gazette* next week. In his difficulty he went to his wife, and made a clean breast of it. She behaved as a good woman ought, put her arms round his neck and told him not to be down-hearted, and then ran for her jewel-case, and gave him her diamonds.'

'Let us have a look at these said diamonds,' replied Mr. Mosheh, without vouchsafing any praise of the wife's devotion.

The man took out a small parcel, and unfolded it. There, on a sheet of cotton wool, reposed the gems, five-and-thirty large white stones, the smallest of them as big as a pea.

‘Why, they’re unset!’ exclaimed the diamond merchant. ‘How’s that?’

‘My friend is a proud man. He didn’t want his wife’s jewels to be recognised.’

‘So he broke up the setting? Your friend was a fool, sir. What do these stones belong to?’ speculated Mr. Mosheh, touching the gems lightly with the tip of his fleshy forefinger, and arranging them in a circle. ‘A collet necklace, evidently, and a very fine collet necklace it must have been. Your friend was an idiot to destroy it.’

‘I believe it was a necklace,’ assented the visitor. ‘My friend celebrated his silver wedding last year, and the diamonds were a gift to his wife on that occasion.’

The room was dimly lighted with a single candle which the servant had set down upon the centre table when she admitted the stranger.

Mr. Mosheli drew down a movable gutta percha gas tube, and lighted an office lamp, which stood beside his desk. By this light he examined the jewels. Not content with the closest inspection, he took a little file from his waistcoat pocket, and drew it across the face of one of the stones.

‘Your friend is doubly a fool, if he isn’t a knave,’ said Mr. Mosheli. ‘These stones are sham.’

There came a look so ghastly over the face of the grey-bearded man that the aspect of death itself could hardly have been more awful.

‘It’s a lie!’ he gasped.

‘You are an impudent rascal, sir, to bring me such trumpery, and a blatant ass for thinking you could palm your paste upon Benjamin Mosheli, a man who has dealt in diamonds, off and on, for nearly thirty years. The stones are imitation, very clever in their way, and a very good colour. Look here, sir: do you see the mark my file leaves on the surface? Father Abraham, how the man trembles! Do you mean to tell me that you’ve been fooled by these stones—that you’ve

given money for them. I don't believe a word of your cock and a bull story about your London tradesman and his silver wedding. But do you mean to say you didn't know these stones were duffers, and that I shouldn't be justified in giving you in charge for trying to obtain money upon false pretences?'

'As I am a living man, I thought them real,' gasped the grey-bearded man, who had been seized with a convulsive trembling, awful to see.

'And you advanced money upon them?'

Yes.'

Much?'

'All I have in the world. All! All!' he repeated passionately. 'I am a ruined man. For God's sake give me half a tumbler of brandy, if you don't want me to drop down dead in your house.'

The man's condition was so dejected that Mr. Moshel, though inclined to believe him a swindler, took compassion upon him. He opened the door leading into his dining-room, and called to his wife.

'Rachel, bring me the brandy and a tumbler.'

Mrs. Mosheh obeyed. She was a large woman, magnificently attired in black satin and gold ornaments, like an ebony cabinet mounted in ormolu. Nobody could have believed that she had fried a large consignment of fish that very day before putting on her splendid raiment.

‘Is the gentleman ill?’ she asked kindly.

‘He feels a little faint. There, my dear, that will do. You can go back to the children.’

‘They’re uncommonly clever,’ said Mr. Mosheh, fingering the stones, and testing them one by one, sometimes with his file, sometimes by the simpler process of wetting them with the tip of his tongue, and looking to see if they retained their fire and light while wet. ‘But there’s not a real diamond among them. If you’ve advanced money on ’em, you’ve been had. They’re of French manufacture, I’ve no doubt. I’ll tell you what I’ll do for you. If you’ll leave ’em with me, I’ll try and find out where they were made, and all about them.’

‘No, no,’ answered the other, breathlessly, drawing the parcel out of Mr. Mosheh’s reach, and rolling up the cotton wool hurriedly. ‘It’s not worth while,

it's no matter. I've been cheated, that's all. It can't help me to know who manufactured the stones, or where they were bought. They're false, you say, and if you are right I'm a ruined man. Good night.'

He had drunk half a tumbler of raw brandy, and the brandy had stopped that convulsive trembling which affected him a few minutes before. He put his parcel in his breast pocket, pulled himself together, and walked slowly and stiffly out of the room and out of the house, Mr. Mosheh accompanying him to the door.

'You can show those stones to as many dealers as you like,' said the Jew; 'you'll find I'm right about 'em. Good night.'

'Good night,' the other answered faintly, and so disappeared in the wintry fog that wrapped the street round like a veil.

'Is the fellow a knave or a fool, I wonder?' questioned Mr. Mosheh.

CHAPTER V.

‘TO A DEEP LAWNY DELL THEY CAME.’

It was summer time again, the beginning of June, the time when summer is fairest and freshest, the young leaves in the woods tender and transparent enough to let the sunlight through, the ferns just unfurling their broad feathers, the roses just opening, the patches of common land and furzy corners of meadows ablaze with gold, the sky an Italian blue, the day so long that one almost forgets there is such a thing as night in the world

It was a season that Laura had always loved, and even now, gloomy as was the outlook of her young life, she felt her spirits lightened with the brightness of the land. Her cheerfulness astonished Celia, who was in a state of chronic indignation against John Treverton, which was all the more intense because she was forbidden to talk of him.

‘I never knew any one take things so lightly as you do, Laura,’ she exclaimed, one afternoon when she found Mrs. Treverton just returned from a long ramble in the little wood that adjoined the Manor House grounds.

‘Why should I make the most of my troubles? Earth seems so full of gladness and hope at this season that one cannot help hoping.’

‘*You* cannot, perhaps. Don’t say *one* cannot,’ Celia retorted, snappishly, ‘if you mean to include me. *I* left off hoping before I was eighteen. What is there to hope for in a parish where there are only two eligible bachelors, one of the two as ugly as sin, and the other an incorrigible flirt, a man who seems always on the brink of proposing, yet never proposes?’

‘You have not counted your devoted admirer, Mr. Sampson. He makes a third.’

‘Sandy-haired, and a village solicitor. Thank you, Laura. I have not sunk so low as that. If I married him I should have to marry his sister Eliza, and that would be quite too dreadful. No, dear, I can manage to exist as I am, ‘in maiden

meditation, fancy free.’ When I change my situation I shall expect to better myself. As for you, Laura, you are a perfect wonder. I never saw you looking so well. Yet in your position I am sure I should have cried my eyes out.’

‘That wouldn’t have made the position better. I have not left off hoping, Celia, and when I feel low-spirited I set myself to work to forget my own troubles. There is so much to be looked after on an estate like this—the house, the grounds, the poor people—I can always find something to do.’

‘You are a paragon of industry. I never saw the garden as pretty as it is this year.’

‘I like everything to look its best,’ said Laura, blushing at her own thoughts.

The one solace of her life of late had been to preserve and beautify the good old house and its surroundings. The secret hope that John Trevorton would come back some day, and that life would be fair and sweet for her again, was the hidden spring of all her actions. Every morning she said to herself, ‘He may come to-day;’ every

night she consoled herself with the fancy that he might come to-morrow.

‘I may have to wait for years,’ she said in her graver moments, ‘but let him come when he will, he shall find that I have been a faithful steward.’

She had never left the Manor House since she came back from her lonely honeymoon. She had received various hospitable invitations from the county families, who were anxious to be civil to her now that she was firmly established among them as a landowner; but she refused all such invitations, excusing herself because of her husband’s enforced absence. When he returned to England she would be delighted to visit with him, and so on; whereby the county people were given to understand that there was nothing extraordinary or unwarrantable in Mr. Treverton’s non-appearance at the Manor House.

‘His wife seems to approve of his conduct, so one can only suppose that it’s all right,’ said people; notwithstanding which the majority clung affectionately to the supposition that it was all wrong.

Despite Laura’s hopefulness, and that sweetness

of temper and gaiety of mind which preserved the youthful beauty of her face, there were hours—one hour, perhaps, in every day—when her spirits drooped, and hope seemed to sicken. She had pored over John Treverton's last letter until the paper upon which it was written had grown thin and worn with frequent handling; but at the best, dear as the letter was to her, she could not extract much hope from it. The tone of the writer was not utterly hopeless. Yet he spoke of a parting that might be for life; of a tie that might last for ever; a tie that bound him in honour, if not in fact, to some other woman.

He had wronged her deeply by that broken marriage—wronged her by supposing that the possession of Jasper Treverton's estate could in any wise compensate her for the false position in which that marriage had placed her; and yet she could not find it in her heart to be angry with him. She loved him too well. And this letter, whatever guilt it vaguely confessed, overflowed with love for her. She forgave him all things for the sake of that love.

When had she begun to love him, she asked herself sometimes in a sad reverie. She had questioned him closely as to the growth of his love, but had been slow to make her own confession.

How well she remembered his pale, tired face that winter night, just a year and a half ago, when he came into the lamp-lit room and took his seat on the opposite side of the hearth, a stranger and half an enemy.

She had liked and admired him from the very first, knowing that he was prejudiced against her. The pale, clear cut face, the grey eyes with their black lashes, which made them look black in some lights, hazel in others; the thoughtful mouth, and that all-pervading expression of melancholy which had at once enlisted her sympathy; all these had pleased her.

‘I must have been dreadfully weak-minded,’ she said to herself, ‘for I really think I fell in love with him at first sight.’

That little wood behind the Manor House grounds was Laura’s favourite resort in this early summer

time. It was the most picturesque of woods, for the ground sloped steeply to a narrow river, on the further side of which there was a rugged bank, topped by a grove of fir-trees. The stream ran brawling over a rocky bed; and the bold masses of rock, here shining purple, or changeful grey, there green with moss: the fringe of ferns upon the river brink, the old half-ruined wooden bridge that spanned the torrent; the background of beech and oak, mingled with the darker foliage of old Scotch firs; and towering darkly above all, the lofty ridge of moorland, made a picture that Laura fondly loved. Here she came when the prim gardens of the Manor House seemed too small to hold her thoughts and cares. Here she seemed to breathe a freer air.

She came to this spot one evening in June, after a day of sunny weather which had seemed longer and wearier and altogether harder to bear than the generality of her days. Celia had been with her all day, and Celia's small talk had been drearier than solitude. Laura was thankful to be alone, in this quiet shelter, where the indefatigable labours of the woodpecker and the babble of the stream

were the only sounds that stirred the summer silence.

All day long the heat had been hardly endurable ; now there was a breath of coolness in the air, and nothing left of that fierce sun but a soft yellow light in the western sky.

Laura had a volume of Shelley in her pocket, taken up from among the books on the table in her favourite room. It was one of the books she loved best, and had been the companion of many a ramble. She seated herself on a fallen trunk of oak beside the river, and opened the volume haphazard at 'Rosalind and Helen,' and she read on till she came to those lovely lines which picture such a spot as that where she was sitting.

' To a deep lawny dell they came,
To a stone seat beside a spring,
O'er which the column'd wood did frame
A roofless temple, like the fane,
Where, ere new creeds could faith obtain
Man's early race once knelt beneath
The overhanging Deity.'

She read on. The scene suited the poem, and its deep melancholy harmonised but too well with her

own feelings. A story of love the fondest, truest, most unworldly, ending in hopeless sorrow. Never had the gloom of that poem sunk so heavily upon her spirit.

She closed the book suddenly, with a half-stifled sob. The moon was rising, silver pale, above the dark ridge of moorland. The last streak of golden light had faded behind the red trunks of the firs. The low, melancholy cry of an owl sounded far off in the dark heart of the wood. It was indeed as if—

‘The owls had all fled far away
In a merrier glen to hoot and play.’

In such a spot a mind attuned to melancholy might easily shape spectral forms out of the evening shadows, and call up the ghosts of the loved and lost. Laura looked up from her book with a strange uncanny feeling, as if, indeed, some ghostly presence were near. Her eyes wandered slowly across the rocky bed of the river, and there, on the opposite bank, half in shadow, half in the tender light of the big round moon, she saw a tall figure and a pale face looking at her. She rose

with a half-stifled cry of fear. That face looked so spectral in the mystical light. And then she clasped her hands joyously and cried, 'I knew you would come back!'

This was the deserter's welcome. No frowns, no upbraidings—a sweet face beaming with delight, a happy voice full of fondest welcome.

'Humph,' cries the woman-hater, 'what fools these women are!'

John Treverton came, stepping lightly across the rocks, at some risk of measuring his length in the stony bed of the river, and in less than a minute was by his wife's side.

Not a word did he say for the first moment or so. His greeting was dumb. He took her to his heart, and kissed her as he had never kissed her yet.

'My own one, my wife!' he cried. 'You are all mine now. Love, I have been patient. Don't be hard with me.'

This last remonstrance was because she had drawn herself away from his arms, and was looking at him with a smile which was no longer tender, but ironical.

‘Have you come back to Hazlehurst to spend an evening?’ she asked, ‘or can you prolong your visit for a week?’

‘I have come back to spend my life with you—I have come back to stay for ever! They may begin to build me a vault to-morrow in Hazlehurst churchyard. I shall be here to occupy it, when my time comes—if you will have me. That is the question, Laura. It all depends on you. Oh, love, love, answer me quickly. If you but knew how I have longed for this moment. Tell me, sweet, have I quite worn out your love? Has my conduct forfeited your esteem for ever?’

‘You have behaved very unkindly to me,’ she answered, slowly, gravely, her voice trembling a little. ‘You have used me in a manner which I think a woman with proper womanly pride could hardly forgive.’

‘Laura,’ he cried, piteously.

‘But I fear I am not possessed of proper womanly pride: for I have forgiven you,’ she said, innocently.

‘My treasure, my delight!’

‘But it would have been so much easier to forgive if you had trusted me, if you had told me all the truth. Oh, John, husband and yet no husband, you have treated me very cruelly.’

Here she forgot her unreasoning joy at seeing him again, and suddenly remembered herself and her wrongs.

‘I know, love,’ he said, on his knees beside her, ‘I seem to have acted vilely, and yet, believe me, dearest, my sole motive was the desire to protect your interests.’

‘Your conduct has put me to shame before all mankind,’ urged Laura, meaning the village of Hazlehurst. ‘You have no right to approach me, no right to look me in the face. Have you not confessed in that cruel letter that you were not free to marry me, that you belong in some way to another woman.’

‘That other woman is dead. I am free as the air.’

‘What was she? Your wife?’

There was a look of infinite pain in John Treverton’s face. His lips moved as if about to speak,

but he was silent. There are some truths difficult of utterance; and it is not easy to all men to lie.

'It is too painful a story,' he began, at last, speaking hurriedly, as if he wanted to make a speedy end of a hateful subject. 'A good many years ago, when I was very young, and a most consummate fool—I got myself entrapped into a Scotch marriage. You have heard of the peculiarities of the marriage law in Scotland.'

'Yes, I have heard and read about them.'

'Of course. Well, it was a marriage and no marriage—a reckless, half-jesting promise, tortured, by false witnesses, into a legal undertaking. I found myself, unawares, a married man—a millstone tied round my neck. I will tell you no more of that wretched entanglement, dearest. It would not be good for you to hear. I will only say that I bore my burthen more patiently than most men would have borne it, and now I thank God with all my heart and soul for my freedom. And I come to you, dear love, to implore your forgiveness, and to ask you to join me, three weeks hence, in some quiet place thirty or forty miles from here, where no one will know

us, and where we may be married again some fine summer morning ; so that, if that Scotch marriage of mine were really binding, and our former marriage illegal, we may tie the knot securely, and for ever.'

'You should have trusted me at first, John,' Laura said reproachfully.

'I ought to have done so, love, but I so feared to lose you. Oh, my darling, grant all I ask, and you shall never have cause to regret your goodness. Forgive me, and forget all that I have told you to-night. Let it be as if it had never been. The second marriage which I ask for is a precautionary act—needless, perhaps—but it will make me feel more secure in my happiness. My beloved, will you do what I ask?'

She had dried her tears. Her heart was welling over with gladness and love for this sinner, still kneeling by her side as she sat on the ferny river bank, in the brightening moonlight, holding both her hands in his, looking up pleadingly as he made his prayer. There was no thought of denying him in her mind. She only wanted to yield with good grace, not to humiliate herself too deeply.

‘It must be as you wish,’ she said. ‘When you have arranged this second marriage you can write to me and tell me where and when it is to be. I will come to the place you appoint with my maid. She is a good girl, and I can trust her. She can be one of the witnesses of our wedding.’

‘Are you sure she will not talk about it afterwards?’

‘I have proved her already, and I know she is trustworthy.’

‘Be it so, love. See here.’ He took a Cornish guide book from his pocket, and opened it at the map of the county. ‘I have been thinking that we might go farther west, to some remote parish. Here is Camelot, for instance. I never heard of any one living at Camelot, or going to Camelot, since the time of King Arthur. Surely there we should be safe from observation. The guide book acknowledges that there is nothing particular to be seen at Camelot. It has not even a good word for the inns. The place is miles away from everything. It is an anomaly in towns, for though it has a town hall and a

market place, it has no church that it can call its own, but hooks itself on to a brace of out-lying churches, each a mile and a half away. Let us be married at one of those out-of-the-way churches, Laura, and I shall love Camelot all the days of my life, as one loves the plain face of a friend who has done one a great service.'

Laura had nothing to say against Camelot; so it was finally resolved that John Treverton should get there as quickly as rail and coach would carry him, and that he should have the banns put up at one of the churches, and that he should meet Laura at Didford Junction three weeks from that day, and escort her by coach across the wild moors and under the shadow of giant brown tors, to the little town of Camelot, where a modest population of six or seven hundred souls seemed to have lost themselves among the hills, and got somehow left behind in the march of time and progress.

John Treverton and his wife lingered for a long time beside the brawling river, walking arm in arm along the narrow woodland path, half in

moonshine half in shadow, talking of the future; both supremely happy, and one of them, at least, tasting pure and perfect happiness for the first time in his life.

'Shall we go to Penzance after our wedding, love, and then cross to the Scilly Isles for our honeymoon. It will be so sweet to inhabit a little rock-bound world of our own, circled by the Atlantic.'

Laura assented that it would be sweet. Her world was henceforth to be small, John Treverton its sun and centre, and all things outside him and beyond him a mere elementary universe.

He looked at his watch presently when they came out of the pinewood into the broad moonlight.

'By Jove, dearest, I shall have no more than time to see you as far as the orchard gate, and then run off to catch the last train for Didford. I shall sleep at the hotel there, to-night. I don't want to be seen within twenty miles of Hazlehurst till you and I come back from the Scilly Isles, sunburnt and happy, to take up our abode

at the dear old Manor House. Oh, Laura, how I shall love that good, honest, respectable old home ; how earnestly I shall thank God night and morning for my blissful life. Ah, love, you can never fully understand what a kicked-about waif I have been for the last seven years of my worthless existence. You can never fully know how thrice blessed is a tranquil haven after stormy seas.

They had opened their hearts and minds fully to each other in that long talk beside the river ; she withholding nothing, he entering into no details of his life-history, but frankly admitting his unworthiness. She told him how she had borne her life at Hazlehurst after her solitary return from a supposed honeymoon ; how she had hidden the truth from all her little world. It would seem the most natural thing for her to go away to meet her husband on his return from abroad, and then for them both to come home together.

They parted at the orchard gate hurriedly, for John had three miles to walk to the station, and and only three-quarters of an hour for the walk. There was but one hasty kiss at parting, but, oh,

the blissfulness of such a kiss on the threshold of so fair a future. Laura threaded her way slowly through the moonlit orchard, where the old apple trees cast their crooked shadows on the soft deep turf, and happy tears poured down her flushed cheeks as she went.

‘God is good to us, God is very good,’ she kept repeating inwardly. ‘Oh, how can we ever be grateful enough, how can we ever be earnest enough in doing our duty?’

In all her talk with John Treverton she had not said a word about the settlement. She had not praised him or thanked him for his generosity. All thought of Jasper Treverton’s fortune was as remote from her mind as if the old man had died a pauper, and there had been not a shilling of loss or gain contingent upon her marriage with his kinsman.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHURCH NEAR CAMELOT.

CELIA opened her eyes to their widest extent a fortnight later when Mrs. Treverton informed her that she was going to meet her husband, and that, after a few weeks' holiday, they were coming home together for good.

‘For good,’ repeated Celia, drily, after which her eyes slowly resumed their normal state, and her lips drew themselves tightly together. ‘I am glad to hear that your existence as a married woman is about to assume a reasonable shape. Up to this time you have been as insoluble a mystery as that horrid creature, the man in the iron mask; and, pray, may I be permitted to ask, without being considered offensive, where you are to meet the returning wanderer?’

‘At Plymouth,’ said Laura, who had received minute instructions from John as to what she was to say.

‘Why blush at the mention of Plymouth,’ asked Celia. ‘There is nothing improper in the name of Plymouth; nothing unfit for publication. I presume that, as Mr. Treverton arrives at Plymouth he comes from some distant portion of the globe?’

‘He is coming from Buenos Ayres, where he had business that absolutely required his personal attention.’

‘What an extraordinary girl you are, Laura,’ ejaculated Celia, her eyes again widening,

‘Why extraordinary?’

‘Because you must have been perfectly aware that I, and I think I may go so far as to say all the inhabitants of Hazlehurst, have been bursting with curiosity about your husband for the last six months, and yet you could not have the good grace to enlighten us. If you had said he had gone to Buenos Ayres on business, we should have been satisfied.’

‘I told you he had affairs that detained him abroad.’

‘But why not have given his affairs a local habitation and a name?’

‘My husband did not wish me to talk about him.’

‘Well, you are altogether the oddest couple. However, I am very glad things are going to be different. Would it be too much to ask if Mr. Treverton will remain at the Manor House, or if he is going to re-appear only in his usual meteoric fashion?’

‘I hope he will stay at Hazlehurst all his life.’

‘Poor fellow,’ sighed Celia. ‘If he does I’m sure I shall pity him.’

‘You need not be so absurdly literal. Of course we shall go far afield sometimes and see the world, and all that is interesting and beautiful in it.’

‘How glibly you talk about what ‘we’ are going to do. A week ago you could not be induced to mention your husband’s name. And how happy you look; I never saw such a change.’

‘It is all because I am going to see him again. I hope you do not begrudge me my happiness?’

‘No, but I rather envy you. I only wish some

benevolent old party would leave me a splendid estate on condition I married a handsome young man. You would see how willingly I would obey him. There should be no mystery about my conduct, I assure you. I should not make an iron mask of myself.'

Celia wrote next day to her brother to tell him how that most incomprehensible of husbands, John Treverton, was expected home from Buenos Ayres, and how his wife was going to Plymouth to meet him. 'And I never saw any human creature look so happy in my life,' wrote Celia. 'I have seen dogs look like it when one has given them biscuits, and cats when they sit blinking at the fire, and young pigs lying on a bank in the sunshine. Yes, I have seen those dumb things appear the image of perfect, unreasoning, unquestioning happiness, which looks neither behind nor before; but such an expression is rarely to be seen in humanity.'

A nice letter for Edward Clare to get—disappointed, more or less out at elbows, with a growing sense of failure upon him, sick to death

of his London lodging, sick of the few literary men whose acquaintance he had contrived to make, and with whom he did not amalgamate as well as he had anticipated. He tore his sister's lively epistle into morsels and sent them flying over Waterloo-bridge, upon the light summer wind, and felt as if he would like to have gone over with them.

‘Yet once I thought she loved me,’ he said to himself, ‘and so she did, before that plausible scoundrel came in her way. But I ought to remember how much she gains by loving him. If the old man had happened to leave me his estate, perhaps she might have looked unutterably happy at the idea of my return after a long absence, Only God, who made women, knows what hypocrites they are,’ and then Mr. Clare went home to his shabby lodging, and sat down in bitterest mood, and dipped his pen in the ink, and wrung out of himself a passionate page of verse for one of the magazines—not without labour and the sweat of his brow—and then took his poem and sold it, and dined luxuriously on the proceeds,

hugging his wrongs and nursing his wrath to keep it warm, as he sat in a corner of the bright little French restaurant he liked best, slowly sipping his modest half-bottle of Pomard.

That which Celia had told him was perfectly true. There never was a happier woman than Laura, after that interview by the river. During the last week before her departure she was full of business, preparing for her husband's return.

'Your master will be here in a few weeks,' she said to the old housekeeper, with infinite pride, 'and we must have everything ready for him.'

'So we will, ma'am, spick and span,' answered Mrs. Trimmer. 'It will be happiness to have him settle down among us. It must have been a sore trial to you both, to be parted so, just at the beginning of your married life, too. It would have come more nat'ral afterwards.'

'It was a sore trial, Trimmer,' Mrs. Treverton answered, full of confidential friendliness. 'But it's all over now. I could hardly have borne to speak about it before.'

'No, ma'am, I noticed as you was close and

silent like, and I knew my place too well to say anything. Troubles take hold of people different. If there's anything on my mind I must out with it, if it was but to Ginger, the tortoise-shell cat; but some folks can keep their worrits screwed up inside 'em. It hurts 'em to speak.'

'That was my case, Trimmer. It hurt me to speak my husband's name, or to hear it spoken, while he was forced to be far away from me. But now it's all different. You cannot talk of him too much to please me. I hope you will be as fond of him as you were of the dear old man who is gone.' . . .

Mr. Treverton must have a sitting room of his own, of course; a den where he might write his letters, and see his bailiff, where he could smoke and meditate at his leisure, study if he ever cared to study, read novels even, were he disposed to be lazy; and where his happy wife could only come on sufferance, deeming it a vast indulgence to be allowed to sit at his feet sometimes, or even to fill his pipe for him, or, in rough winter weather, to kneel down before the blazing fire and

warm his slippers, when he had come in from a cold ride round his land, doing good wherever he went, like a benevolent fairy in the modern form of an enlightened landlord.

After much debate and perplexity, Laura decided upon giving her husband, for his own particular sanctum, that very room in which they two had met for the first time, on the snowy winter night when John Treverton came to see his dying kinsman. It was a good old room, not large, but pleasant, oak panelled, with a fireplace in the corner, which gave a quaintness to the room; an oak mantelpiece with half a dozen narrow shelves running in a pyramid above it, and on these shelves an arrangement of old blue Nankin cups and saucers, crowned at the apex with the most delightful thing in tea-pots. There was an old cabinet in the room, so full of secret drawers, and mysterious boxes and recesses at the back of drawers, that it was in itself the study of a lifetime.

‘Never hide anything in it, my dear,’ Jasper Treverton had said to his adopted daughter,

‘for be sure if you do you won’t be able to find it.’

To this room Laura brought other treasures ; the most comfortable easy chairs in the house, the best of the small Dutch pictures, the softest of the Turkey carpets, the richest tapestry curtains, two or three fine bronzes, a lovely little Chippendale bookcase. This last she filled with all her own favourite books, robbing the book-room below ruthlessly, in the delight of enriching her husband’s study, as this room was henceforth to be called.

‘He shall know and feel that he is welcome,’ she said to herself, softly, as she lingered in the room, touching everything, re-arranging, polishing, whisking away invisible grains of dust with a dainty feather brush, caressing the things that were so soon to belong to the man she loved.

The adjoining room—the room in which Jasper Treverton had died—was to be her own bed-chamber. It was a spacious room, with three long windows and deep window seats, a fireplace at which an ox, or at all events a baron of beef might have been roasted—a tall fourpost bed, with

twisted columns, richly carved; curtains of Utrecht velvet, crimson and amber, lined with white silk all somewhat faded, but splendid in decay—a, noble room altogether, yet Laura had rather a horror of it, dearly as she had loved him whose generous spirit seemed to haunt the chamber.

But Mrs. Trimmer told her that, as the mistress of Hazlehurst Manor, she ought to occupy this room. It always had been the Squire's bed-chamber, and it ought to be so still.

‘Nothing like old ways,’ said Mrs. Trimmer, decisively.

The room opened into John Treverton's study. That was a reason why Laura should like it.

If he were to sit up late at night reading or writing, she would be near him. She might see the face she loved, through the open door, bending over his papers in the lamplight.

‘We are going to be a regular Darby and Joan, Mrs. Trimmer,’ she said to the housekeeper, as she made all her small domestic arrangements.

In such trivial work she contrived to get rid of the third week, and then came the lovely

summer noontide when she started on her journey, with the faithful Mary in attendance.

‘Mary,’ she had said, the night before, ‘I am going to trust you with a great secret, because I believe you are staunch and true.’

‘If you could find another young woman in my capacity, mum, that would be stauncherer or truerer, I’ll undertake to eat her without a grain of salt,’ protested Mary, sacrificing grammar to intensity.

The train from Beechampton took them across a stretch of wild moorland, where the granite cropped up in scattered boulders, as if Titans had been pelt-ing one another, to Didford Junction. At Didford they found John Treverton waiting for them, and here they got on to another line of railway, and into a more pastoral landscape, and so on to Lyonstown—pronounced Linson—where they mounted the stage-coach which was to take them across the moor to Camelot. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon by this time, and it would be evening before they reached the little town among the Cornish hills. Oh, what a happy drive it was across the free

open moorland, in the mild afternoon light, a thousand feet above the sea-level, above the smoke and turmoil of cities, far away from all mankind, in a lonely world of heather and granite. The dark brown hills, twin brothers, rose between them and the western sun, now blending into one dark mass of mountain, now standing far apart, as some new turn of the narrow moorland road seemed to alter their position in the landscape. It was like a new world even to Laura, though she came from the sister county, and had lived the best part of her life under the edge of Dartmoor.

‘I really think I should like to spend my life on these hills,’ said Laura, as she and John Treverton sat side by side behind the sturdy little coachman, whose quaintly comical face might have made the fortune of a low comedian. ‘It seems such a beautiful world, even in its wildness and solitude, so pure and fair, and free from the taint of sin.’

The sunlight behind the big brown tors was fading, and the air growing crisp and cool, keenly biting, even at odd times, though it was midsummer. John drew a soft woollen shawl round his com-

panion's shoulders, and even in this little action his heart thrilled at the thought that henceforward it was his duty to protect her from all the ills of life. And so through the deepening gloom they came to Camelot, a narrow street on the slant of a hill, folded in grey twilight as in a mantle.

The inn where Laura and her maid were to put up for the night was common-place and commercial—a house that had evidently seen better days, but which had plucked up its spirits and furbished up its rickety old furniture since the establishment of the North-Cornwall coach, a blessed institution, linking a wild and solitary district with railways and civilisation.

Here Laura rested comfortably enough through the short summer night, while John Treverton endured the discomforts of a second-rate tavern over against the market-place. At eight o'clock next morning he presented himself at the hotel where Laura and her maid were waiting for him, and then the three went on foot to the outlying church where John Treverton was to take this woman, Laura,

for his wife for the second time within six months.

‘I could not have been happier in my choice of a locality than I was in fixing upon Camelot,’ said John, as they walked side by side along the country lane, between tall banks of briar and fern, in the sweet morning air, with the faithful Mary strolling discreetly in the rear. ‘I found the most accommodating old parson, who quite entered into my views when I told him that for certain reasons which I need not explain, I wished my marriage to be kept altogether quiet. ‘I shall not speak of it to a creature,” replied the good old soul. “No man would come to Camelot to be married who did not wish to hide himself from the eye of the world. I shall respect your secret, and I’ll take care that my clerk does the same.”’

The old church smelt rather like a vault when they went in out of the breezy summer day, but it was a cleanly whitewashed vault, and the sun was shining full upon the faded crimson velvet of the communion table, above which appeared the

ten commandments and the royal arms in the good old style. Steeped in that sunshine stood the bride and bridegroom, gravely, earnestly repeating the solemn words of the service ; no witnesses of the act save the grey-headed clerk and the girl Mary, who seemed to think it incumbent upon somebody to be moved to tears, and who therefore gently sniffed and faintly sobbed in the background. Never had Laura looked lovelier than when she stood beside her husband in the little closet of a vestry, signing her name in the mouldy old register ; never had she felt happier than when they walked away from the lonely old church, after a friendly leave-taking of the good vicar, who blessed them and gave them God speed as heartily as if they had been born and bred in his parish. The coach was to pick them up at the cross roads about half a mile from the church, having previously picked up their luggage in Camelot, and they were to go back across the moor to Lyonstown, and from Lyonstown by rail to the extreme west and thence to the Scilly Isles.

‘Can nothing happen now to part us, John?’

Laura asked while they were sitting on a ferny bank waiting for the coach. 'Are our lives secure from all evil in the future?'

'Who can be armed against all misfortune, love?' he asked. 'Of one thing I am certain. You are my wife. Against the validity of our marriage of to-day no living creature can say a word.'

'And the legality of our previous marriage might have been questioned.'

'Yes, dearest, there would have always been that hazard.'

CHAPTER VII.

HALCYON DAYS.

THERE were no bonfires or floral arches, no rejoicings of tenantry or farm labourers, when John Treverton and his wife came home to Hazlehurst Manor. They came unannounced one fine July afternoon, arriving in a fly hired at Beechampton, much to the distress of Mrs. Trimmer, who declared that there was absolutely nothing in the house. Yet many an anxious city housekeeper would have considered the noble array of hams, pendant from the massive beams of the kitchen ceiling, the fitch of bacon, the basket of new-laid eggs, the homely saffron-hued plum cakes, the dainty sweet biscuits, the ox tongues and silver side of beef in pickle, the chickens waiting to be plucked—worthy to count as something.

‘You might have sent me a telegram, mum, and then I might have done myself credit,’ said

Mrs. Trimmer, dolefully. 'I don't believe there's a bit of fish to be had in Hazlehurst. I was in the village at twelve o'clock this blessed day, and there was one sole frizzling on the slates at Trimpson's, and I'll warrant he's been sold by this time.'

'If he isn't sold he must be pretty well baked, so we won't have anything to say to him,' said John Treverton, laughing. 'Don't worry yourself about dinner, my good creature; we are too happy to care what we eat.'

And then he put his arm round his wife's waist and led her along the corridor that ended in the book-room, where she had left him in his despair seven little months ago. They went into this room together, and he shut the door behind them.

"Dear love, to think that I should enter this room the happiest of men. I, who sat by that table in such anguish as few men are ever called upon to suffer. Oh, Laura, that was the darkest day in my life.'

'Forget it,' she said earnestly, 'never let the

past be named between us. There is so much of it that is still a mystery to me. You have told me so little of your early life, John, that if I were to think of the past I might begin to doubt you. Oh, love, I have trusted you blindly. Even when all things looked dark I went on trusting you; I clung to my belief in your goodness. I don't know whether it was my weakness or my strength which made me so confident.'

'It was your strength, dearest, the strength of innocence, the strength of that divine charity which "thinketh no evil." Dear love, it shall be the business of my life to prove you right, to show myself worthy of your trust.'

They roamed about the house together, looking at everything, as if each object were new to both, happy as children. They recalled their first meeting—their second—and confessed all they had felt on each occasion. It was delightful to them to travel backward through the history of their love, now that life was bright and the future seemed all secure.

So their life went on for many days, Laura

initiating her husband in his position as Squire of Hazlehurst. She took him round to all the cottages and introduced him to their inmates, and together they planned improvements which were to make Hazlehurst Manor one of the most perfect estates in the country. Above all things was there to be happiness for every one. Drainage and sanitation were to be so improved that fever and infection would be almost an impossibility. Every farm labourer was to have a clean and comfortable shelter, and a patch of ground where he might grow his cabbages, and, if blessed with a love of the beautiful, rear roses and carnations that might vie with the flowers in a ducal garden. Here in this mild western world, where frost and snow were almost strangers, the labouring man might clothe his cottage wall with myrtle, and grow fuchsias as big as apple-trees.

To John Treverton, sick to the heart of cities, the novelty of this country life was full of delight. He was interested in the stables, the home farm, the gardens, even the poultry yard. He had a kindly word for the lowest hind upon his land.

It seemed as if, in the great happiness of his married life, he had opened his heart to all mankind.

‘And are you really happy, Laura?’ he asked one day, when he and his wife were dawdling through the August afternoon beside the river where they had met in the June moonlight. ‘Do you honestly believe that your adopted father made the best possible provision for your future when he gave you to me?’

He asked this question in a moment of delicious idleness, lying at his wife’s feet, she sitting in a natural easy chair formed by two blocks of granite, moss-grown, ferny, luxurious, books and work half-forgotten by her side, and by his an idle fishing rod. He had little doubt as to the answer to his question, or he would hardly have asked it.

‘I think dear papa must have had a prophetic power to choose what was best for me,’ she said, smiling down at her husband.

And then they went on in a strain which was very sweet to them both, travelling step

by step over those early days when they were almost strangers, recalling with a studious minuteness what he had felt and thought, what she had dreamed and hoped. How he had begun with a fixed determination to detest her; and how that gloomy resolve had slipped out of his mind at their first interview, despite his endeavour to hold it fast.

‘There is one question that I have wanted to ask you, Laura,’ he said, presently, growing suddenly grave, with a look in which there was a shadow of trouble, ‘but I have shrunk from asking it, somehow, and put it off indefinitely. And yet it is a very natural curiosity on my part, and can hardly offend you.’

Her face was even more serious than his by this time, and wore a look of fear. She answered not a word, but sat, with lips, slightly parted, waiting for him to go on.

‘You remember your interview with a gentleman whom you admitted to the garden after dark, and whom you described to me afterwards as a relation. How is it, love, that in all our

confidential talk you have never told me anything about that man'?'

'The answer is simple enough,' she said, quietly, yet he could but wonder to see how pale she had grown. 'In all our talk together we have spoken of things that belong to our happiness. You have never touched upon the dark passages in your life, nor I on those in mine. You remember what Longfellow says:—

" Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and dreary.

The relation of whom you speak is one who has not done well in this world. My dear adopted father was prejudiced against him, or at any rate he thought so. From time to time he has appealed to me secretly for aid, and I have helped him secretly. I am sorry for him, deeply sorry, and I am glad to help him, at a distance; but there are reasons why I have never sought, why I never should seek, to bring him nearer to me.'

'I feel sure that whatever you have done has been wise and right, dearest. There must be a black sheep in every family. I have played the

part myself, and ought to sympathise with all such delinquents.'

Delicacy prevented his pursuing the subject further. Could he do less than trust her fully, who had shown such noble confidence in him?

A life so happy would have been bounded within a very narrow circle had John Treverton and his wife consulted only their own inclination; but society expects something from a well born country gentleman with fourteen thousand a year. The Lady Parkers and Lady Barkers, of whom Celia had spoken somewhat disparagingly, came in state, swinging lightly on C springs in their old family carriages, to call upon the young couple.

Invitations to ceremonious dinners followed in due course, and were reluctantly accepted, since it would have seemed ungracious to refuse them: and by-and-bye Mrs. Trimmer, the housekeeper, suggested that the Manor House ought to give a series of dinners, such as she remembered when she was a giddy-pated young kitchen-maid in the service of Jasper Treverton's father and mother.

'They used to send out invitations for two or

three dinner parties when the pheasant shooting began, and get it over,' said Mrs. Trimmer, 'for they were homely people, and didn't care much for company. The old gentleman was wrapped up in his books, and the old lady was wrapped up in her garden; but when they gave a dinner there was no mistake about it.'

Laura submitted to inexorable custom.

'We have eaten people's dinners, and I suppose we must invite them here,' she said, with an air of serio-comic vexation, 'or they will consider us dishonest. Shall I make a list of the people to be asked, Jack, and shall we give Trimmer *carte blanche* about the dinner?'

'I suppose that will be best,' assented John, whose Christian name affection had corrupted to Jack. 'Trimmer is a capital cook of the substantial English school. Her *menu* may be wanting in originality, but it will be safe.'

'Well, I am glad you are awaking to the necessity of living like civilised Christians, instead of spooning all day in the seclusion of a house, compared with which Robinson Crusoe's

island must have been a vortex of dissipation,' exclaimed Celia Clare, who was present at this discussion. 'I am glad that at last, if it were only for my sake, you are going to conform to the laws of society. How am I to get a husband, I should like to know, unless I meet people here? There is no other house worth visiting in the neighbourhood.'

'We'll take your necessities into consideration, my dear girl,' answered John, gaily, 'and if you can suggest any eligible bachelors, we'll ask them to dinner.'

'That's exactly what I cannot do,' said Celia, with a despairing shrug. 'There are no eligible bachelors indigenous to the soil. The only plan would be to put a *nota bene* to your cards of invitation, "If you have any nice young men about you, pray bring them."'

'Laura might give a dance at Christmas, and then we might beat up for young men,' answered John. 'I'm afraid as long as we confine ourselves to dinner parties, we shall not be able to do much for you, my poor Celia.'

‘But are you not going to have people to stay in the house when the pheasant shooting begins?’ inquired Celia, with uplifted eyebrows. ‘Are not your old friends going to rally round you? I thought they always did when a man came into a fortune.’

‘I believe that is one of the characteristics of friendship,’ said John. ‘But I lost sight of my old friends—the friends of my soldiering days, that is to say—nearly seven years ago, and I don’t care about digging them out.’

‘I wonder they don’t come to the surface of their own accord,’ said Celia. ‘And how about the friends you have made since you sold out? You can’t have existed seven years without society.’

‘I have existed quite as long as that without what you would call society.’

‘Ah, I see,’ assented Celia, ‘the people you have known are not people you would care to bring here, or to introduce to your wife.’

‘Precisely.’

‘Poor Laura,’ thought Celia, and then there followed a pause, brief but uncomfortable.

‘Shall I write the list of invitations?’ asked Laura, who was sitting at her Davenport. They were in the book-room, the fresh autumnal air blowing in across beds and borders filled with September’s gaudy flowers.

‘Yes, dear, beginning, of course, with Sir Joshua and Lady Parker, and descending gradually in the social scale to——’

‘My father and mother,’ interrupted Celia, ‘if you mean to ask them. I’m sure you can’t go lower than the parson of the parish; for he’s generally the poorest man in it.’

‘And often the most beloved,’ said John Treverton.

‘Do you think I should give my first dinner party without inviting your father and mother, Celia?’ asked Laura, reproachfully. ‘They will be my most honoured guests.’

‘Heaven knows how the mater is to get a new gown,’ ejaculated Celia; ‘but I’m sure she can’t come in the old one. That grey satin of hers has been to so many dinner parties that I should think it could go by itself, and would know how to be-

have, without having poor mother inside it. How well all the servants hereabouts must know the back of that dress, and the dark patch on the shoulder, where Lady Barker's butler spilt some lobster sauce. It is like the blood-stain on Lady Macbeth's hand. All the benzine in the world won't take it out. Oh, by-the-bye,' pursued Celia, rattling on breathlessly, 'if you really don't mind being overrun with the Clare family, would you write a card for Ted?'

'With pleasure,' said Laura, 'but is he not in London?'

'At this present moment he is; but we are expecting him daily at the Vicarage. The fact is he has not made his mark, poor fellow, and he is rather tired of London. I suppose there are too many young men there, all wanting to make their mark.'

CHAPTER VIII.

A VILLAGE IAGO.

EDWARD CLARE came back to his native village a few days later, looking somewhat dilapidated by his campaign in the great metropolis. He had found the gates of literature so beset with aspirants, many of them as richly endowed as himself, that the idea of pushing his way across the threshold seemed almost hopeless, indeed quite hopeless, for a young man who wanted to succeed in life without working very hard, or with at most a little spasmodic industry. His verses, when he was lucky, had earned him something like five pounds a month; when luck was against him he had earned nothing. A newspaper man, whose acquaintance he made at the Cheshire Cheese, had advised him to learn shorthand, and try his fortune as a reporter, working upwards from that platform to the editorial chair. This was an honest drudgery

which might do very well for your dull plodders, but against which the fiery soul of Edward Clare revolted.

‘I am a poet, or I am nothing,’ he told his friend, ‘*Aut Cæsar aut nullus.*’

‘That was a first-rate motto——for Cæsar,’ said the journalist, ‘but I think it’s rather misleading for fellows of average talent. The result is so often *nullus.*’

Mr. Clare was on the point of asking his friend to take another brandy and soda, but at this remark he coiled up, as the Yankees say. Average talent, indeed. Imagine one of Mr. Swinburne’s most facile plagiarists hearing himself called a fellow of average talent.

Edward Clare would not yoke his noble mind to the newspaper plough, nor would he stoop even so low as to write prose. A wretched publisher had told him that if he would write children’s books there was a field open for him; but Edward left that publisher’s office bursting with offended pride.

‘Children’s books, forsooth,’ he muttered. ‘I

suppose if Catnach had been alive he would have asked me to write halfpenny ballads.'

So having failed to carve his way to fame, or to make a regular income, and having wasted the money he had earned on kid gloves and stalls at fashionable theatres, Mr. Clare conceived an intense disgust for the metropolis, which had treated him so scurvily, and turned his thoughts homewards to woodland and moor, to trout stream and meadow. He found that the poetic temperament required rural scenery, blue skies, and pure air. Heine had contrived to live and write in Paris, and so had De Musset: but Paris is not London. Edward made up his mind that the streets and squares of Bloomsbury were antagonistic to poetry. No bird could sing in such a cage. True that Milton had composed 'Paradise Lost' within close city lanes, under the clamorous bells of St. Bride's, but then Milton was blind, and Edward Clare was like a popular lady novelist of the present day, who begged that she might not be compared with Dickens. He would have protested against being put on a level with such a passionless bard as Milton.

‘I shall never achieve any great work in London,’ he told himself. ‘For my *magnum opus* I must have the tranquillity of wood and moor.’

He had quite made up his mind that he was to write a great poem, though he had settled neither the subject nor the form. He was waiting for the divine breath to inspire him. The poem was to be as popular as the ‘Idylls of the King,’ but as passionate as ‘Chastelard.’ He was not going to write in a goody-goody strain to please anybody.

Edward Clare felt himself a little like the prodigal son, when he came home to the Vicarage after this abortive campaign in the field of literature. If he had not wasted his substance, it was only because he had little substance to waste. He had spent all that his father had sent him, and had received small additions to this allowance out of his mother’s scantily-supplied purse. He came home penniless and dispirited: and he felt rather offended that no fatted calf was slain to do him honour, and that his parents received him with an air of unmistakable despondency.

‘Really, my dear Edward, you ought to begin to think of some definite course,’ said the father. ‘It may be too late for a profession, but the Government offices ——’

‘Red tape and drudgery, with a salary that would scarcely afford dry bread and a garret,’ interrupted Edward contemptuously. ‘No, my dear father, as a poet I will stand or fall.’

‘I’m sorry to hear it,’ sighed the Vicar, ‘for at present it looks like falling.’

What Edward really meant was that he would depend upon his father until the public and the critics, or the critics and the public, could be brought to acknowledge him as one of the new lights in the starry world of imagination. Mr. Clare understood this, and felt that it was rather hard upon him as a man of limited means.

Edward arrived at Hazlehurst only the night before Mrs. Treverton’s dinner-party.

‘Oh, yes, I’m going,’ he told Celia, when she asked him if he had accepted Laura’s invitation. ‘I want to see how this Treverton fellow plays the country squire.’

‘As if to the manner born,’ answered Celia. ‘The part suits him admirably. I don’t want to wound your feelings, Ted, dear, but Mr. Treverton and Laura are the happiest couple I ever saw.’

“‘These violent delights have violent ends,
And in their triumph die,’”

quoted Edward, with a diabolical sneer. ‘I am not going to envy them their happiness, my dear. Whatever feeling I once entertained for Laura is dead and buried. A woman who could sell herself, as she has done—’

‘Sell herself! Oh, Ted, how can you say anything so dreadful! I tell you she is devotedly attached to John Treverton.’

‘And he rewards her devotion by running away from her before the end of their honeymoon; and when he turns up again, after an interval of six months or so, during which nobody knows what he has been doing, she receives him with open arms. A curious couple assuredly. But an estate worth fourteen thousand pounds a year excuses a good deal of eccentricity; and I

can quite understand that Mr. and Mrs. Treverton are immensely popular in the neighbourhood.'

'They are,' said Celia, warmly; 'and they deserve to be. If you knew how good they are to their tenants, their servants, and the poor.'

'Goodness of that kind is a very sagacious investment, my unsophisticated child. It may cost a man five per cent. of his income, and it buys him respectability.'

'Don't be bitter, Edward.'

'I am a man of the world, Celia, and not to be hoodwinked by shams and appearances.'

'Then you'll never be a poet,' protested his sister. 'A man who doesn't believe that good deeds come from the hearts of men—a man who looks for an unworthy motive behind every generous action—such a man as that will never be a great poet. It is quite too dreadful to hear you talk, Edward. That odious London has corrupted you.'

Edward went to the dinner next day, but not with his family. He came alone, and rather late, in order to observe the effect of his entrance upon

Laura Treverton. Alas, for his wounded vanity ! She welcomed him with a frank smile and a friendly grasp of the hand.

‘I am so glad you have come back in time to be with us to-night,’ she said.

‘I came back on purpose for to-night,’ he answered, throwing as much tenderness as he could into a common-place remark.

‘I think you know every one here. I need not introduce you.’

‘I know the local magnates, of course. But I daresay there are some of your husband’s swell friends who are strangers to me.’

‘There are none of my husband’s friends,’ answered Laura, ‘we are strictly local.’

‘Then I’m afraid you’ll find the evening rather uphill work.’

‘I expect you to help me through it by the brilliancy of your conversation,’ Laura answered, lightly, as Edward moved aside to make way for a new arrival.

He had contrived to make her uncomfortable for a minute or so, for that speech of his had set

her wondering why her husband had no friends worth summoning to his side now that fortune smiled upon him.

The dinner party was not a very joyous festivity, but everybody felt, nevertheless, that it was a great social success. Lady Parker, in ruby velvet and diamonds, and Lady Barker in black satin and rubies, made two central lights round which the lesser planets revolved. There was the usual county and local talk; reprobation against the farming parson of a neighbouring parish for having treacherously trapped and slain four cub foxes since last season; cordial approval of a magistrate who had sent a lad of nine to jail for stealing three turnips, and who had been maligned and held up to ridicule by the radical newspapers for that necessary assertion of the rights of property; a good deal of discussion as to the prospects of the hunting season; a good deal of talk about horses and dogs, and a little about the outside world, and its chances of peace or war, famine or plenty. The party was too large for general conversation, but now and then the subdued Babel

of tongues became concentrated here and there into a focus, and a gentle hush descended on a select few listening eagerly to a single talker. This happened oftenest at that part of the table near which Edward Clare was sitting, next but one to John Treverton. Mr. and Mrs. Treverton were seated opposite each other in the middle of the long table, with all the more important guests clustered about them in a constellation of local splendour, leaving the two ends of the table for youth and obscurity. Edward Clare had got himself into the constellation by a fluke; a portly justice of the peace having suddenly succumbed to gout, and sent an apology at the last moment; whereupon Laura had despatched Celia with a message to the butler, and had contrived that there should be a shuffling of cards, and that Edward Clare should be put into this place of honour.

She did this from a benevolent desire to soothe his wounded feeling, suspecting that there might be some soreness in his mind at this first meeting with her in her new character, and knowing that

vanity made the larger half of this young man's sensibility.

Edward had rewarded her by talking remarkably well. He was fresh from London, and well posted in all that is most interesting in the butterfly life of a London season. He told them all about the pictures of the year, let fly some sharp arrows of ridicule against the new school of painting, described the belle of the season, and let his hearers into the secret of her popularity.

‘The curious part of the story,’ he said, in conclusion, ‘is that nobody ever considered the lady pretty till she burst all at once upon society as the one perfect creature that the world had seen since the Venus was dug up at Milo. She never was thought so in her own world. No one was more surprised than her own family when she was elected queen of beauty, unless it was herself. Her mother never suspected it. At school she was considered rather plain than otherwise. They say she was married off early because she was the dowdy of the family, and now she cannot take her drive in the park without all London craning its neck

and straining its eyes to get a look at her. When she goes into society the women stand upon chairs to stare at her over other people's shoulders. I suppose they want to find out how it's done. This kind of popularity may seem very pleasant in the abstract, but I think it's rather hard upon the lady.'

'Why hard upon her?' inquired John Treverton.

'Because there's no salary goes with the situation. The belle of the season ought to get something to lighten the expenses of her year of office, like the Lord Mayor. See what is expected of her! Every eye is upon her. Every woman in London looks to her as a model of taste and elegance, and eagerly strives to dress after her. How is she to put a limit upon her milliner's bill, when she knows that all the society journals are lying in wait to describe her last gown, to eulogise her newest bonnet, to write an epigram upon her parasol, to be ecstatic about her boots. Can she ride in a hired carriage? No. Can she be absent from Goodwood, or missing at Cowes? No. She must die standing. I say

that since she furnishes the public with interest and amusement—much better than the Lord Mayor does, by the way—she ought to get a handsome allowance out of the public purse.’

When he had exhausted pictures, and reigning beauties, and the winner of the Leger, Edward began to talk about crime.

‘People in London have a knack of wearing a subject to tatters,’ he said. ‘I thought neither the newspapers nor the public would ever get tired of talking about the Chicot murder.’

‘The Chicot murder. Ah, that was the ballet dancer, was it not?’ enquired Lady Barker, who was so interested in this vivacious young man on her right hand that she had hardly given due attention to Mr. Treverton, who was on her left. ‘I remember feeling rather interested in that mystery. A diabolical murder, certainly. And how stupid the police must have been not to find the murderer.’

‘Or how clever the murderer to sink his identity so completely as to give the police the slip,’ suggested Edward.

‘Oh, but he must have got away to the Colonies, or somewhere, surely,’ cried Lady Barker. ‘There are so many vessels leaving England now-a-days. You don’t imagine for a moment that the murderer of that wretched woman remained in England?’

‘I think it highly probable that he did, discreetly hidden under some outer shell of intense respectability.’

‘I suppose you think it was the husband?’ put in Sir Joshua Parker, from his place at Laura’s right hand.

‘I don’t see any ground for doubt,’ replied Edward. ‘If the husband was not guilty, why should he disappear the moment the crime was discovered?’

‘He may have had reasons of his own for wishing to get away, reasons unconnected with the mode and manner of his wife’s death,’ hazarded John Treverton.

‘What reasons could he have had strong enough to induce him to run the risk of being thought a murderer?’ asked Edward, incredulously. ‘No

innocent man would place himself in such a position as that.'

'Not knowingly,' said John; 'but this man may have acted on impulse, without reckoning the consequences of his act.'

'To admit that would be to consider him a fool,' retorted Edward; 'and from all I have heard of the fellow, he belonged to the other half of humanity.'

'You mean that he was a knave?'

'I mean that he was a fellow who knew the ropes. He was not the sort of man to find his wife's throat cut, and to make a bolt, leaving every newspaper in London free to brand him as a coward and a murderer,' said Edward, decisively.

John Treverton pursued the subject no further. Lady Parker, who sat at his left, had just begun to question him about a late importation of Jersey cows, in which she was deeply interested; whereupon he favoured her with a detailed account of their graces and merits. Laura happened to look up at Edward Clare as he finished speaking, and the expression of his countenance startled and shocked

her. Never had she seen so keen a look of malice in any living face. Only in the face of Judas in an old Italian picture had she ever beheld such craft and such venom. And that malignant look—brief as a flash of lightning—glanced at her unconscious husband, whose face was gravely courteous as he bent his handsome head a little to tell Lady Parker about the Jersey cows.

‘Good heavens!’ thought Laura, with a sense of absolute fear. ‘Is it possible that this young man can be so bitter against my husband because I loved him best? What could the love be like that could engender such malice!’

Later in the evening when Edward came and hung over the ottoman where Laura was sitting, she turned from him with an involuntary movement of disgust.

‘Have I offended you?’ he asked, in a low voice.

‘Yes. I saw a look in your face at dinner that told me you dislike my husband.’

‘Do you expect me to love him—very dearly—at first? You must at least give me time to get

accustomed to the idea that he is your husband. Time cures most wounds. Give me time, Laura, and do not judge me too hardly. I possess the poet's curse, a mind more sensitive than the minds of ordinary men—dowered with the love of love, the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn.'

'I hope you will leave your dowry outside when you come across this threshold,' said Laura, with a smile that was more contemptuous than relenting. 'I can accept friendship from no one who does not like my husband.'

'Then I will struggle with the original man within me, and try to like John Treverton. Believe me, Laura, I want to be your friend—in honest and unequivocal friendship.'

'That is the kind of friendship I expect from your father's son,' said Laura, in a gentler tone.

She was too happy, too secure in her own happiness, to be unforgiving. She reasoned with herself—arguing against instinct and conviction—and told herself that Edward Clare's malevolent look had meant less than it seemed to mean.

Edward looked on, and saw John Treverton

play his part as host and master in a manner that he was compelled to admit was irreproachable. The new squire showed none of the pride in himself and his surroundings which might have been anticipated in a man unexpectedly raised to the possession of a large fortune. He did not brag of his wine, or his horses, his pictures, or his farm. He accepted his position as quietly, and filled it as naturally, as if he had been born heir to an entailed, unalienable estate.

‘Upon my word, they are a charming couple,’ said Sir Joshua Parker, in his fat voice, ‘and an acquisition to our county families.’

Sir Joshua was very fond of talking about our county families, although his own establishment in that galaxy had been but recent, his father and grandfather having made their fortunes in the soap-boiling business, amidst the slums of Lambeth. Lady Barker, the dowager, was of the *vieille riche*, having been a Trefusis and an heiress when she married the late General Sir Rodney Barker, K.C.B.

After that one little flash of anger on the night of the dinner party, Edward Clare was all friend-

liness. Celia spent a large portion of her life at the Manor House, where she was always welcome; and it seemed only natural that her brother Edward should drop in frequently, almost as he had done in the old days when Jasper Treverton was alive. There were so many reasons for his coming. The library at the Manor House was much larger and better than the Vicar's modest collection of old-fashioned books. The gardens were a delight to the young man's poetic soul. John Treverton showed no dislike to him. He appeared to consider the poet a poor creature, whose going or coming could make no difference.

‘I confess that I have a contempt for that kind of man,’ he told his wife, candidly. ‘An effeminate, white-handed mortal, who sets up as a wit and a poet on the most limited stock-in-trade—all his best goods in his windows, and nothing but empty shelves inside the shop. But of course, as long as you like him, Laura, he will be welcome here.’

‘I like him for the sake of his father and mother, who are my oldest and best friends,’ answered Laura.

‘Which means in plain English that you only tolerate him?’ said John, carelessly. ‘Well, he is harmless, and sometimes amusing. Let him come.’

Edward came, and seemed at home and happy in the small family circle. He lounged beside the fire in the snug book-room, and joined in the easy familiar talk, when the autumn dusk was deepening and Laura made tea at her pretty little table, with her husband by her side, while Celia, who had a fancy for eccentric positions and attitudes, sat on the hearth-rug.

One November evening, about a month after the dinner party, the conversation happened to light upon the county magnates who had adorned that banquet.

‘Did anybody ever see such a funny little figure as Lady Barker, surmounted by that wig?’ cried Celia. ‘I really think her dressmaker must be very clever to make any kind of gown that will hold together upon her. I don’t complain of her being fat. A woman may weigh sixteen stone and carry herself like a duchess. But Lady

Barker is such an undecided figure. There's no consistency in her. When she sinks on a sofa one expects to see her collapse, like a mould of jelly that hasn't cooled properly. Oh, Edward, you should see Mr. Treverton's portrait of her — the most delicious caricature.'

'Caricature!' echoed Edward. 'Why, that is another new talent. If Treverton goes on in this way we shall have to call him the admirable Crichton. It was only last week that I found out he could paint; and now you say he is a caricaturist. What next?'

'I believe you have come to the end of my small stock of accomplishments,' said John Treverton, laughing. 'I used once to amuse myself by an attempt to illustrate the absurdities of human nature in pen and ink. It pleased my brother officers, and helped to keep us alive sometimes in the dulness of country quarters.'

'Talking of caricature, by the way,' said Edward, lazily, as he slowly stirred his cup of tea, 'did you ever see "Folly as it Flies?"'

'The comic newspaper? Yes, often.'

‘Ah, then you must have noticed the things done by that fellow Chicot—the man who murdered his wife. They were extraordinarily clever—out and away the best things I have ever seen since the days of Gavarni; rather too French, perhaps, but remarkably good.’

‘It was natural the style should be French, since the man was French.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Edward, ‘he was as English as you or I.’

Celia had risen from the floor and lighted a pair of candles on Laura’s open Davenport, near which Edward was sitting. She selected a sheet of paper from a heap of loose sheets lying there, and showed it to her brother, candle in hand.

‘Isn’t that too lovely?’ she asked.

Edward examined the sketch with a critical air.

‘I don’t want you to suppose I’m trying to flatter you,’ he said at last, ‘but, upon my word, this little sketch is as good as anything of Chicot’s, and very much in his style.’

‘It is the only accomplishment of my husband’s that I cannot praise,’ said Laura, with gentlest

reproof, 'for it cannot be exercised without unkindness to the subject of the caricature.'

"He that is robbed not wanting what is stolen, let him not know it, and he is not robbed,"' quoted Celia, who had resumed her lowly place at Laura's feet. 'Shakespeare's ineffable wisdom found that out; and may not the same thing be said of caricature? If Lady Barker never knows what a lifelike portrait you have drawn of her, with half-a-dozen scratches of a Hindoo pen, the faithfulness of the picture can't hurt her.'

'But isn't it the usual course to show that kind of thing to all the lady's particular friends, till the knowledge of it percolates to the lady herself?' enquired Edward, with his lazy sneer.

'I had rather cut off my right hand than make a harmless, good-natured old lady unhappy,' said Laura, warmly.

'Turn up your cuff, Mr. Treverton, and prepare your wrist for the chopper,' cried Celia. "But really now, if Lady Barker's figure is like a dilapidated mould of jelly, she ought to know it. Did not one of those seven old plagues of Greece whose

names nobody ever could remember, resolve all the wisdom of his life into that one precept, "Know thyself?"'

Celia rattled on gaily; Laura and Edward both joined in her careless talk; but John Treverton sat grave and silent, looking at the fire.

CHAPTER IX.

'IN THE MEANWHILE THE SKIFS 'GAN RUMBLE SORE.'

AFTER that portrait of Lady Barker, John Treverton drew no more caricatures. It seemed as if he had laid aside the pen of the caricaturist in deference to his wife's dislike of that somewhat ill-natured art. But he had not abandoned the higher walks of art, for he had made himself a studio out of one of the spare bedrooms that looked northward, and was engaged on a portrait of his wife, an altogether fanciful and ideal picture, which he worked at for an hour or two daily with infinite delight. He had many pleasant labours and occupations at this period of his life. The farm, the hunting field, the business details of a large property, which he wished to conduct in an orderly manner, not hiding his talents in a napkin, but improving the estate, which Jasper Treverton had considerably increased during his

long life, but upon which the old man had been somewhat loth to spend money. It was altogether a full and happy life which John Treverton led with his wife in this first year of their union, and it seemed to both that nothing was wanting to perfect their happiness. And yet, by-and-bye, when there came the prospect of a child being born in the grave old house which had so long been undisturbed by the patter of childish feet, the fulfilment of this sweet hope seemed the one thing needed to fill their cup of joy.

While at the Manor House all was bliss, life dawdled on comfortably enough at the Vicarage, where the good, easy-tempered, hard-working vicar had begun to be reconciled to the idea that his only son was to be an idler all his life; until perchance this seemingly barren plant should some day put forth the glorious flower of genius. And then the father's patience, the mother's love, would be rewarded all at once for weary days of waiting and despondency.

Edward had contrived to make himself particularly agreeable since his return to the family roof

tree. He was less cynical than of old ; less apt to rail against fate for not having set his lines in pleasanter places.

Even Celia was beguiled into the belief that her brother was completely cured of his attachment to Laura.

‘I suppose his passion was like that poor sentimental old Petrarch’s,’ mused Celia, who had read about half a dozen sonnets of the illustrious Italian’s in the whole course of her life, ‘and he will go on spinning verses about the lady of his love for the next twenty years, without feeling any the worse for his platonic affection. He seems to enjoy being at the Manor House ; and he and John Treverton get on very well together, considering how different they are in character.’

Edward made himself very comfortable in his rural home. He had tried London life, and had grown heartily sick of it ; and he was now less disposed than of old to grumble at the dulness of a Devonshire village. What though he saw the same stolid bovine faces every day ? Were they not better and fairer to look at than the

herd of strange faces—keen and sharpened as if the desire for gain was an absolute physical hunger—that had passed him by in the smoke-tainted streets of London? These faces knew him. Here hats were touched as he passed by. People noticed whether he looked well or ill. Here, at least, he was somebody, an important figure in the sum of village life. His death would cause a sensation, his absence would make a blank. Edward did not care a straw about these simple villagers; but it pleased him that they should care for him. He settled himself down in his old home—the good substantial old Vicarage, a roomy house with stone walls, high gables, and heavy chimney stacks, shut in from the road by a holly hedge of a century's growth, sheltered at the back by the steep slope of the moor, while its front windows faced undulating pastures and distant woods.

Here Edward made himself a study, or den, where he could work at his *magnum opus*, and where his solitude was undisturbed by intrusion. It was understood that his labours in this sanctuary of genius were of the hardest. Here he gave up

his soul to convulsive throes and struggles, as of Pythoness on her tripod. The chamber was at the end of a long passage, and had a lattice overlooking the moor. Here tobacco was not forbidden, although the Vicar was no smoker, and had an old-fashioned detestation of cigars. Edward found a good deal of smoke necessary to relax the tension of his nerves, during the manufacture of his poem. If the door was suddenly opened by Celia or Mrs. Clare, the poet was apt to be discovered reclining in his rocking chair, with a cigar between his lips, and his eyes fixed dreamily upon the topmost ridge of moorland. At such times he told his mother and sister he was doing his thinking. The scored and blotted manuscript on his writing-table testified to the severity of his labours; but the sharp-eyed Celia perceived that the work progressed but slowly. There was a good deal of meditation and cigar smoke necessary to its elaboration. Once or twice Edward had been discovered reading a French novel.

‘One so soon forgets a language if one doesn’t read a thoroughly idiomatic work now and then,’ he said, explaining this seeming frivolity.

He kept up his connection with the popular magazines, sending them as many trifles in the drawing-room style as they could expect from him; and by this means he contrived to be well dressed and provided with pocket-money, without sponging on his father.

‘All I want is the run of my teeth for the next year or so, till I have made a name,’ he told his mother; ‘that is not much for an only son to ask of his father.’

The Vicar agreed that the demand was modest. He would have preferred a son of a more active and eager temperament—a son who would have taken to the church, or law, or medicine, or even soldiering. But it was not for him to complain if Heaven had given him a genius, instead of a commonplace plodder. It was the old story of the ugly duck, no doubt. By-and-by, the snow-white wings would unfold themselves for a noble flight, and the admiring world would acknowledge the beauty of the swan. Mrs. Clare, who adored her only son, after the manner of weak-minded mothers, was delighted to have him at home, for good, as she said,

delightedly. She made his den as luxurious as her small means would allow ; put up bookshelves wherever he wanted them, covered his mantelboard with velvet, and draped it with point lace of her own working, bought him cigar stands and ash trays, tobacco jars, and fusee boxes, blotting books, slippers, down pillows for his hours of lassitude, soft fluffy rugs to cover his feet when he sank on his snug little couch, prostrate after lengthened wrestling with an unpropitious muse. All that a doting mother can do to spoil a young man, Mrs. Clare did for her son ; and it happened unfortunately that he was not made of that strong stuff which the sweet flatteries of love cannot corrupt.

There were certain hours when the poet was approachable. At five o'clock on those evenings when the brother and sister were not at the Manor House, Celia used to bring him a cup of coffee, and the small stock of gossip which she had been able to collect in the course of her frivolous day. She would seat herself on a hassock beside the fire, or even on the edge of the fender, and chatter gaily, while Edward lay back in his easy chair,

sipping his coffee, and listening with an air of condescending indulgence.

A good deal of Celia's talk was naturally about her friends at the Manor House. She had got over her prejudice against John Treverton, and was even enthusiastic in her praise of him. He was 'quite too lovely.' As a husband she declared him 'perfect.' She wished that Heaven had made her such a man.

'I really think Laura is the luckiest girl in creation!' she exclaimed. 'Such a husband, such a house, such a stable, such gardens, such a rent-roll! It is almost provoking to see her take everything so quietly. I believe she is grateful to Providence, because she is dreadfully religious, you know. But her placidity almost enrages me. If I had half such good fortune I should want to jump over the moon!'

'Laura is thoroughly good style, my dear. Well-bred people never want to jump over the moon,' Edward remarked, languidly.

'Strictly fraternal,' ejaculated Celia, with a shrug.

'I am very glad to hear she is so happy,' pursued Edward, with an air of ineffable good nature. 'Thank heaven, I have quite got over my old weakness about her, and can contemplate her happiness without a twinge of jealousy. But at the same time I do rather wonder that she can be thoroughly happy with a man of whose antecedents she knows nothing.'

'How can you say that, Ted? She knows who he is, and what he is. She knows that he was a lieutenant in a crack regiment, and sold out because he had run through his money——'

'Sold out just seven years ago,' interrupted Edward. 'What has he been doing with himself in the meantime?'

'Knocking about London.'

'That is a very vague phrase. Seven years. He must have earned his living somehow during the greater part of that time. The money he got for his commission would not last him long. He must have had his own particular circle of acquaintances during that interval. Why are none of them forthcoming? Why is he so silent about the ex-

periences of those seven years? Man is an egotistical animal, my dear Celia. Be sure that there is always something to be ashamed of when a man keeps silence about himself.'

'There is something rather odd about that, certainly,' assented Celia, in a musing tone. 'John Treverton never talks of his past life, or, at any rate, of the time that has gone by since he left the army. I suppose he has been in London all the time, for he talks as if he were awfully disgusted with London life. If I were Laura I should insist upon knowing all about it.'

'There can be no happiness between man and wife without perfect confidence,' said Edward. 'No enduring happiness, at least.'

'Poor, dear Laura,' sighed Celia. 'I always said it was an ill-omened marriage; but lately I have thought that I was going to turn out a false prophet.'

'Has she ever told you what took her husband away after their marriage?'

'No, on that point she has been as silent as the grave. She told me once that he had been to

Buenos Ayres, called away on business. I have never been able to extort anything more out of her.'

'It must have been a curious kind of business which called a man away from his newly-wedded wife,' said Edward.

Clara nodded significantly, and looked at the fire. She loved Laura well, but she loved scandal better.

Edward gave a short impatient sigh, and turned his head fretfully upon the cushion which maternal hands had worked in softest wool. That movement, expressive of disgust with life in general, did not escape the sharp eyes of his sister.

'Ted, dear, I'm afraid you have not left off being unhappy about Laura,' she murmured sympathetically.

'I am only unhappy about her when I think she is married to a scoundrel.'

'Oh, Ted, how can you say such a thing?'

'Celia, a man who can give no account of seven years of his life must be a scoundrel,' Edward Clare said, decisively. 'Say nothing

to alarm Laura, I beg you. I am talking to you to-day as if you were a man, and to be trusted. Wait and watch. Wait and watch, as I shall.'

'Edward, how you frighten me. You make me feel as if we were living in one of those villages at the foot of Vesuvius, with a fiery mountain getting itself ready to explode and destroy us.'

'There will be an explosion some day, Celia, depend upon it; an explosion that will blow up the Manor House as surely as Kirk o' Field was blown up the night Darnley was slain.'

He said no more, though Celia did not willingly let the subject drop. Indeed, he was inclined to be angry with himself for having said so much, though he had not given his sister his confidence without a motive. He wanted to know all that could be known about John Treverton, and Celia was in a position to learn much that he could not discover for himself.

'I really thought you were beginning to like Mr. Treverton,' the girl said, presently. 'You and he seem to get on so well together.'

‘ I am civil to him for Laura’s sake. I would be guilty of a worse hypocrisy if I thought it would serve her interests.’

Edward sighed, and gave his head another angry jerk upon the cushion. He wanted to do John Treverton deadly harm; and yet he knew that the worst he could do to his rival would bring about no good result to himself. There was nothing to be gained by it. The injury would be irrevocable, deadly; a blight upon name and fortune—perchance the gallows—a shame so deep that a loving wife would scarcely survive the blow. All this was in Edward Clare’s mind as a not impossible revenge. And unhappily there was no smaller revenge possible. He felt himself possessed of a deadly power; but of no power to wound without slaying. He was like the cobra, whose poisonous fangs are provided with an ingenious mechanism which keeps them in reserve until the creature wants to use them. Two hinged teeth lie back against the roof of the snake’s mouth. When he attacks his victim the hinge moves, the fangs descend, the poison gland is pressed, and the deadly poison runs down a groove

in the tooth, and drops into the puncture prepared to receive it. Lop off the wounded limb ere the shadow on the dial has marked the passage of twenty seconds, or the venom will have done its work. Medicine has yet to discover the antidote that can save the life of the victim.

CHAPTER X.

‘AND PURPLE LIGHT SHONE OVER ALL.’

CHRISTMAS was at hand, the first Christmas in Laura's married life, and to her happy fancy it seemed the most wonderful season that had ever been marked on the calendar of the ages. How could she and John Treverton be thankful enough for the blessings Providence had given them? How could they do enough to make other people happy? About a fortnight before the sacred festival she carried Celia off to Beechampton in the pony carriage, to buy a tremendous stock of blankets, and flannel petticoats for the old women, and comfortable homespun coats for the rheumatic old men.

‘Have you any idea as to the amount you are spending, Laura?’ asked the practical Celia.

‘No, dear; but I have one fixed idea, and that is that no one near Hazlehurst shall be cold and wretched this Christmas, if I can help it.’

‘I’m afraid you are encouraging pauperism,’ said Celia.

‘No, Celia; I am waging war against rheumatism.’

‘I hope you don’t expect gratitude.’

‘I only expect the blankets to keep out Jack Frost. And now for the grocer’s.’

She shook the reins gaily, and drove on to the chief grocer of Beechampton, in whose plate-glass windows a pair of tall Japanese jars announced the superior character of the trade transacted inside. Here Mrs. Treverton ordered a hundred parcels of plums, currants, sugar, spice, and candied peel, each parcel containing an ample supply for a family Christmas pudding. The shopman rejoiced as he booked the order, and was eloquent in his praise of ‘our new fruit.’

From the grocer’s they drove to the confectioner’s, and there Laura ordered such a supply of plum cake and buns, muffins and tea cakes, all to be delivered at the Manor House on Christmas Eve, that Celia began to be seriously alarmed for her friend’s sanity.

‘What can you want with all that indigestible rubbish?’ she exclaimed. ‘Are you going to open a pastrycook’s shop?’

‘No, dear. These things are for my juvenile party.’

‘A juvenile party—already! I can’t understand your motive, unless it is to get your hand in for the future. Who are you going to have? All Lady Parker’s nursery, of course—and Lady Barker’s grandchildren, and Mrs. Pendarvis’s seven boys, the Briggses, and the Dropmores, and the Seymours. You’ll want dissolving views, and a conjuror; and you might have *tableaux vivants*, as you don’t seem to care how much money you waste. People expect so much at juvenile parties nowadays.’

‘I think my guests will be quite happy without *tableaux vivants*, or even a conjuror.’

‘I doubt it. Those little Barkers are intensely old for their age.’

‘The little Barkers are not coming to my party.’

‘And the Pendarvis boys give themselves as many airs as undergraduates after their first term.’

‘But I have not invited the Pendarvis boys.’

‘Then what children, in goodness’ name, are to eat all those cakes?’ cried Celia.

‘My party is for the children of the cottagers. All your father’s infant school will be there.’

‘Then all I can say is, I hope you have arranged for the ventilation of your rooms; for if you expect me to spend Christmas Eve in an atmosphere at all resembling that of our infant schoolroom you are reckoning without your host.’

‘I am not reckoning without a knowledge of Celia Clare’s good nature. I shall expect you to help me with all your heart and soul. Even your brother might do something for us. He could give us a comic reading—Mrs. Brown at the play, or something of that kind.’

‘Picture to yourself Algernon Swinburne reading “Mrs. Brown” to a herd of charity children,’ exclaimed Celia, laughingly; ‘I assure you my brother Edward thinks himself quite as important a person as Mr. Swinburne. Would you have him lay aside his *magnum opus* to study “Mrs. Brown at the play?”’

‘I am sure he won’t mind helping us,’ said

Laura. 'I shall have a Christmas tree loaded with gifts, a good many of them useful ones. I shall hire a magic lantern from London; and for the rest we can have all the old-fashioned games—Blind Man's Buff, Oranges and Lemons, Thread my Needle—all the noisiest, wildest romps we can think of. I am going to have the servants' hall cleared out and decorated for the occasion; so there will be no fear of any of the dear old furniture coming to grief.'

'If poor old Mr. Treverton could come to life again, and see such goings on,' ejaculated Celia.

'I am sure he would be glad to know that his wealth was employed in making other people happy. Think of all those poor little children, Celia, who hardly know the meaning of the word pleasure, as rich people understand it.'

'All the happier for them,' said Celia, philosophically. 'The pleasures of the rich are dreadfully hollow; as sickly-sweet and crumbly as a meringue from an inferior pastry cook, with the cream gone sour inside. Well, Laura, you are a good soul, and I will do my very best to help

you through your juvenile muddle. I wonder if fourteen thousand a year would make me benevolent. I'm afraid my expenses would increase at such a rate that I should have no margin for charity.'

Before Christmas Eve came a shadow had fallen upon Laura's life, which made complete happiness impossible, even for one who was bent upon giving joy to others. John Treverton fell ill of a low fever. He was not dangerously ill. Mr. Morton, the local doctor, who had attended Jasper Treverton for twenty years, and who was a general practitioner of skill and experience, made very light of the malady. The patient had got a chill riding a tired horse a long way home through the rain, after his last hunt, and the chill had resulted in slightly feverish symptoms, and Mr. Treverton was a little below par. That was all. The only remedies wanted were rest and good nursing, and for a man in John Treverton's position both were easy.

'Ought I to put off my children's party?'

Laura asked, anxiously, the day before Christmas

Eve. ‘I should be very sorry to disappoint the poor little things, but,’ here her voice faltered, ‘if I thought John was going to be worse——.’

‘My dear Mrs. Treverton, he is not going to be worse; in fact, he is rapidly mending. Didn’t I tell you the pulse was stronger this morning? He will be well in a few days, I hope; but I shall keep him in his room to the end of the week, and I shall not allow him to take part in any Christmas festivities. As for your children’s party, if you can prevent the noise of it reaching him, there is no reason in the world why it should be postponed.’

‘The servants’ hall is quite on the other side of the house,’ said Laura. ‘I don’t think the noise can possibly reach the next room.’

This conversation between Mrs. Treverton and the doctor had taken place in John Treverton’s study—the panelled room adjoining his bedroom—the room in which he and Laura had first met.

‘Then that’s all you need care about,’ replied Mr. Morton.

Laura had been her husband’s only nurse

throughout his illness. She had sat with him all day, and watched him through the night, taking snatches of slumber at intervals on the comfortable old sofa at the foot of the big old-fashioned four-post bed. In vain had John Treverton urged the danger of injury to her own health from the fatigue involved in this tender care of him. She told him she had never felt better or stronger, and never enjoyed more refreshing sleep than on the roomy old sofa.

They had been happy together, even in this time of anxiety. It was Laura's delight to read aloud to the invalid, to write his letters, to pour out his medicine, to minister to all the trivial wants of an illness that caused at its most only a sense of languor and helplessness. Her only regret with regard to the children's party was that for this one evening she must be for the most part absent from the sick room. Instead of reading aloud to her husband, she must give her mind to "Blind Man's Buff," and all her energies to "Thread my Needle."

The winter twilight came gently down, bringing

a light snow shower with it, and at four o'clock Laura was seated at the little Chippendale table by her husband's bed, drinking tea with him for the first time since the beginning of his illness. He had been sitting up for a few hours in the middle of the day, and was now lying outside the bed, wrapped warmly in his long fur-bordered dressing-gown.

He was intensely interested in the children's party, and asked Laura all about her arrangements for entertaining her guests.

‘I should think the great point was to give them enough to eat,’ he said, meditatively. ‘The nearest approach to perfect happiness I ever beheld is a child eating something it considers nice. For the moment the mind of that infant is in a state of complete beatitude. It lives in the present, and the present only. Its little life is rounded into the narrow circle of now. Slowly, thoughtfully, it smacks its lips, and gloats upon the savour it loves. Hardly an earthquake would disturb it from that deep and tranquil delight. With the last mouthful, its gladness departs, and

the child learns that earthly pleasure is fleeting. Let your children stuff themselves all the evening and stuff their pockets before they go home, Laura, and they will realise the perfection of bliss.'

'And to-morrow the poor little creatures would be ill and miserable. No, Jack, they shall enjoy themselves a little more rationally than you propose; and every one of them shall have something to take back to the person they love best at home, so that even a child's idea of enjoyment shall not be utterly selfish. But I shall be so sorry to be away from you all the evening, Jack.'

'And I shall be still more sorry to lose you, love. I shall try to sleep away the hours of your absence. Could you not give me a good dose of chloral now, Laura?'

'Not for the world, dear. I have a horror of opiates, except in extreme cases. I shall contrive to be with you for an odd half hour or two in the course of the evening. Celia is to be my lieutenant.'

'Then I hope you will let her do a good deal of your work, and that I shall see the sweet

face I love, very often. Who is coming, besides the children?'

'Only Mr. Sampson and his sister, and Edward Clare. Edward is going to read an Ingoldsby legend. I suggested "Mrs. Brown at the play;" but he would not hear of her. I am afraid the children won't understand Ingoldsby.'

'You and Celia must start all the laughter.'

'I don't think I could laugh while you are a prisoner here.'

'It has been a very short imprisonment, and your sweet society has made it very happy.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE CHILDREN'S PARTY.

THE servant's hall was one of the finest rooms in the Manor House. It was at the back of the house, remote from all the reception rooms, and had been part of a much older building than the Carolian mansion to which it now belonged. It was lighted by two square latticed windows with stone mullions, looking into the stable yard. There was also a door opening directly into the same stable yard, and offering a convenient approach for the wandering tribes of tramps, hawkers, and gipsies, who boldly defied the canine guardians of the yard, knowing that the stoutest mastiff that ever thundered forth his abhorrence of rags and beggary is only formidable within the circle described by the length of his chain.

On this Christmas Eve the servants' hall looked as cheerful a room as one could choose

for a night's revelry. Huge logs flamed and crackled in the wide old fire-place, and shone and sparkled on the whitewashed wall, which was glorified with garlands of holly and ivy, and lighted with numerous candles in tin sconces made for the occasion by the village blacksmith. Two long tables on trestles were spread with such a meal as a rustic child might see in some happy dream, but could scarcely hope to behold in sober reality. Such mountains of plum cake, such mighty piles of buns, such stacks of buttered toast, such crystal jars of ruby jam and amber marmalade! The guests had been invited for the hour of six, and, as the clock struck, they all came trooping in, with shining faces, and cheeks and noses cherry red after their run through the lightly falling snow. It was not often that snow fell in this western world, and a snowstorm at Christmas was considered altogether pleasant and seasonable, an event for the children to rejoice at.

Laura was ready to receive her young visitors, supported by Mr. Sampson and his sister, Celia Clare, and all the servants. Edward had promised

to drop in later. He had no objection to distinguish himself by a comic reading, but he had no idea of sharing all the fatigue of the entertainment. Mr. and Mrs. Clare were to come in the course of the evening to see their small parishioners enjoying themselves.

The tea party was a great success. Celia worked nobly. While Mrs. Treverton and Miss Sampson poured out the tea, this vivacious damsel flew hither and thither with plates of cake, spread innumerable slices of bread and jam, tied the strings of a score of pinafores, filled every plate the instant it was empty, and provided at every turn for the pleasure of the revellers, who sat in a happy silence—stolid, emotionless, stuffing automatically.

‘You’d hardly think they were enjoying themselves intensely, would you?’ whispered Celia, coming to Laura for a fresh supply of tea, ‘but I know they are, because they all breathe so hard. If this was a gathering of the county families you might think it a failure; but silence in this case means ecstasy.’

At the stroke of seven the tables were being cleared, while Celia, in wild spirits, ran about after the smiling housemaids, crying 'more light, ye knaves, and turn the tables up.' Then came a merry hour at 'Blind Man's Buff' and 'Thread my Needle,' and the silent tea party grew clamorous as a flight of rooks at sunset. At eight Mr. and Mrs. Clare arrived, followed a little later by Edward, who sauntered in with a somewhat languid air, as if he had not quite made up his mind that he ought to be there.

He came straight to Laura, who had just returned from a stolen half hour by her husband's bedside.

'What an uproar,' he said. 'I've come to keep my promise; but do you really think these little animals will care for the Jackdaw of Rheims?'

'I think they will be glad to sit still for a little while after their romp, and I've no doubt they'll laugh at the jackdaw. It's very good of you to come.'

'Is it? If you knew how I detest infant school children you might say so, but if you

knew how I——.’ He left the sentence unfinished. ‘How is Treverton?’ he asked.

‘Much better. Mr. Morton says he will be well in a day or two.’

‘I passed a curious-looking fellow in the road just outside your gates, a regular London Bohemian; a man whose very walk recalled the most disreputable quarters of that extraordinary city. I have no idea who the fellow is; but I’ll swear he’s a Londoner, a swindler, and an adventurer; and I have a lurking idea that I have seen him before.’

‘Indeed! Was it that which attracted your notice?’

‘No, it was the man’s style and manner altogether. He was loitering near the gate, as if with some intention; possibly not the most honourable. You’ve heard perhaps of a kind of robbery known as the portico dodge?’

‘No. I am not learned in such distinctions.’

‘It is a common crime now-a-days. A country house with a portico is a fine field for the display of genius in burglary. One of the gang scales

the portico after dusk, most likely at the family dinner-hour, gets from the roof of the portico through a convenient window, and then quietly admits his accomplices. In all such robberies there is generally one member of the gang, the cleverest and best educated, who has no active part in the crime. He does all the intellectual work, schemes and directs the whole business; but though the police know him and would give their eyes to catch him tripping, he never tumbles into their trap. The fellow I saw at your gates to-night seemed to me just this sort of man.'

Laura looked very serious, as if she were alarmed at the idea of robbery.

'Was this man young or old?' she asked thoughtfully.

'Neither. He is middle-aged, perhaps even elderly, but certainly not old. He is as straight as a dart, spare but broad-shouldered, and with something of a military air.'

'What made you fancy he had some evil design upon this house?' asked Laura, her face clouded with anxious thought.

‘I did not like the way in which he loitered by the gate. He seemed to be looking for some one or something, watching his opportunity. I don’t want to scare you, Laura. I only want to put you on your guard, so that you may have all the doors and shutters looked after with extra care to-night. After all, the man may be perfectly harmless, some seedy acquaintance of your husband, perhaps. A man cannot live in the world of London without that kind of burr sticking to his coat.’

‘You do not flatter my husband by such a supposition,’ said Laura, with an offended look.

‘My dear Laura, do you think a man can live his life without making acquaintance he would not care to exhibit in the glare of noonday. You know the old adage about poverty and strange bed-fellows. I hope there is no treason in reminding you that Mr. Treverton was not always rich.’

‘No. I am not ashamed of his having been poor; but it would shame me if I thought he had any acquaintance in his poverty whom he would blush to own now he is rich. Will you begin your reading? The children are ready.’

The infants, flushed and towzled by their sports, had been ranged on benches by the joint efforts of Tom Sampson, his sister, and Celia Clare, and were now being regaled with cake and negus. Celia had placed a small table, with a pair of candles, and a glass of water at the end of the room, for the accommodation of the reader.

‘Silence!’ commanded Mr. Sampson, as Edward walked to his place, gave a little preparatory cough, and opened his book. ‘Silence for “The Jackdaw of Rheims.”’

‘The Jackdaw sat on the Cardinal’s chair!
Bishop, and abbot, and prior were there;
Many a monk and many a friar,
Many a knight and many a squire,’

began Edward.

A loud peal of the front door bell startled him. He stopped for a moment, and looked at Laura, who was sitting with the Vicar and his wife in a little group near the fireplace at the other end of the room. At the sound of the bell she looked up quickly, and, with an agitated air, kept her eyes fixed on the door, as if she expected some one to enter.

He had no excuse for leaving off reading,

curious as he felt about that bell, and Laura's evident concern. He went on mechanically, full of wondering speculations as to what was going on in the entrance hall, hating the open-mouthed and open-eyed infants who were hanging on his words; while Celia, seated at the end of the front row, started all the laughter and applause.

'Where did I meet that man?' he asked himself over and over again while he read on.

The answer flashed upon him in the middle of a sentence.

'It is the man I saw with Chicot in Drury Lane; the man I talked to in the public-house.'

The door opened, and the slow and portly Trimmer came in, and softly made his way to the place where his mistress was seated. He whispered to her, and then she whispered to Mrs. Clare—doubtless an apology for leaving her—and anon followed Trimmer out of the room.

'What can that man—if it is that man who rang the bell—want with *her*,' wondered Edward, so deeply moved that he could scarcely go on reading. 'Is the secret going to be told to-night? Are the cards going to be taken out of my hands?'

CHAPTER XII.

A DISINTERESTED PARENT.

‘A PERSON has called to see you, ma’am. He begs to apologise for coming so late, but he has travelled a long way, and will be very thankful if you can see him.’

This is what the butler had whispered in Mrs. Treverton’s ear, handing her at the same time a card on which there was a name written—

‘Colonel Mansfield.’

At sight of this name Laura rose, whispered her excuse to Mrs. Clare, and glided quietly from the room.

‘Where have you left this gentleman?’ she asked the butler.

‘I left him in the hall, ma’am. I did not feel sure you would see him.’

‘He is related to my family,’ said Laura, faltering a little; ‘I cannot refuse to see him.’

This brief conversation occurred in the corridor leading from the servants' hall to the front of the house. A tall man, wrapped in a loose, rough great coat was standing just inside the hall door, while Trimmer's subordinate, a rustic youth in a dark brown livery, stood at ease near the fireplace, evidently placed there to protect the mansion from any evil designs on the part of the unknown intruder.

Laura went to the stranger and gave him her hand, without a word. She was very pale, and it was evident the visitor was as unwelcome as he was unexpected.

'You had better come to my study,' she said. 'There is a good fire there. Trimmer, take candles to the study, and some wine.'

'I'd rather have brandy,' said the stranger. 'I am chilled to the bone. An eight hours' journey in a cattle truck is enough to freeze the youngest blood. For a man of my age, and with chronic neuralgia, it means martyrdom.'

'I am very sorry,' murmured Laura, with a look in which compassion struggled against disgust.

‘Come this way. We can talk quietly in my room.’

She went upstairs, the stranger following close at her heels, to the gallery out of which John Treverton’s study, which was also her own favourite sitting-room, opened. It was the room where she and her husband had met for the first time, two years ago, on just such a night as this. It adjoined the bedroom where John Treverton was now lying. She had no desire that he should be a witness to her interview with this visitor of to-night; but she had a sense of protection in the knowledge that her husband would be within call. Hitherto, on the rare occasions when she had been constrained to meet this man, she had confronted him alone, defenceless; and she had never felt her loneliness so keenly as at those times.

‘I ought to have told John the whole truth,’ she said to herself; ‘but how could I—how could I bear to acknowledge——’

She glanced backward, with a suppressed shudder, at the man following her. They were at the door of the study by this time. She opened

it, and he went in after her and shut the door behind him.

A fire was burning cheerily on the pretty, bright-looking hearth, antique in its quaint ornamentation, modern in the artistic beauty of its painted tiles and low brass fender. There were candles on the mantelpiece and on the table, where an old-fashioned spirit bottle on a silver tray cheered the soul of the wayfarer. He filled a glass of brandy and drained it without a word.

He gave a deep sigh of contentment or relief as he set down the glass.

‘That’s a little bit better,’ he said, and then he threw off his overcoat and scarf, and planted himself with his back to the fire, and the face which he turned to the light was the face of Mr. Desrolles.

The man had aged within the last six months. Every line in his face had deepened. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes haggard and bloodshot. The sands of life run fast for a man whose chief nourishment is brandy.

‘Well,’ he exclaimed, in a hard, husky voice.

‘You do not welcome me very warmly, my child.’

‘I did not expect you.’

‘The surprise should be all the pleasanter. Picture to yourself now our meeting, as it would be represented in a novel or a stage play. You would throw your arms wide apart, shriek, and rush to my breast. Do you remember Julia in the “Hunchback” ? With what a yell of rapture she flings herself into Master Walter’s arms.’

‘Do you remember what Master Walter had been to Julia ?’ asked Laura, looking steadily into the haggard eyes, which shifted their gaze as she looked.

‘Real life is flat and tame compared with a stage play,’ said Desrolles. ‘For my part I am heartily sick of it.’

‘I am sorry to see you looking so ill.’

‘I am a perambulating bundle of aches. There is not a muscle in my body that has not its particular pain.’

‘Can you find no relief for this complaint ? Are there not baths in Germany that might cure you ?’

‘I understand,’ interrupted Desrolles. ‘You would be glad to get me out of the way.’

‘I should be glad to lessen your suffering. When I last wrote to you I sent you a much larger remittance than I had ever done before, and I told you that I should allow you six hundred a year, to be paid quarterly. I thought that would be enough for all your requirements. I am grieved to hear that you have been obliged to ride in a third-class carriage in cold weather.’

‘I have been unlucky,’ answered Desrolles. ‘I have been at Boulogne ; a pleasant place, but peopled with knaves. I fell among thieves, and got cleaned out. You must give me fifty or a hundred to-night, and you must not deduct it from your next quarterly payment. You are now a lady of fortune, and could afford to do three times as much as you are doing for me. Why did you not tell me you were married ? Pretty treatment that from a daughter.’

‘Father,’ exclaimed Laura, looking at him with the same calm gaze, which his shifting eyes had refused to meet just now, ‘do you want me to tell you the truth?’

‘Of course. Whatever else do you suppose I want?’

‘Even if it seems hard and cruel, as the truth often is?’

‘Speak away, girl. My poor old bones have been too long battered about in this world for hard words to break them.’

‘How can you ask me for a daughter’s dutiful love?’ asked Laura, in low earnest tones. ‘How can you expect it from me? What of a father’s affection or a father’s care have you ever given to me? What do I know of your life except fraud and mystery? Have you ever approached me except in secret, and as an applicant for money.’

‘It’s a true bill,’ ejaculated Desrolles, with a laugh that ended in a groan.

‘When I was a little motherless child you gave me to the one true friend of your youth. He took me as his adopted daughter, leaving you dying, as he supposed. Years passed, and you let him believe you dead. For ten years you made no sign. Your daughter, your only child, was being reared in a stranger’s house, and you did not

trouble yourself to make one inquiry about her welfare.'

'Not directly. How do you know what measures I may have taken to get information indirectly, without compromising your future. It was for your advantage that I kept myself dark, Laura; it was for your sake that I let my old friend believe me dead. As his adopted daughter your prosperity was assured. What would your life have been with me? To save you I lent myself to a lie.'

'I am sorry for it,' said Laura, coldly. 'In my mind all lies are hateful. I cannot conceive that good can ever come of them.'

'In this case good has come of my innocent deception. You are mistress of a fine estate, wife of a husband whom, as I hear, you love.'

'With all my heart and soul.'

'Is it too much to ask for a ray of your sunshine—a little benefit from your large wealth?'

'I will do anything in reason,' answered Laura, 'but not even for my own father—had you been all that a father should be to his child—would I suffer Jasper Treverton's wealth to be turned to evil

uses. You told me that you stood alone in the world, with no one dependent on you. Surely six hundred a year is an income that should enable you to live in comfort and respectability.

‘It will, when I have got myself clear of past liabilities. Remember that until six months ago the help you gave me amounted only to a hundred a year, except when I appealed to you, under the pressure of circumstances, for an extra trifle. A hundred a year in London, to a man in bad health, hardly served to keep the wolf from the door. I had debts to pay. I have been unfortunate in a speculation that promised well.’

‘In future you will have no occasion to speculate.

‘True,’ said Desrolles, with a sigh, as he filled himself another glass of brandy.

Laura watched him with a face full of pain. Was this a father she could acknowledge to the husband she loved? Only with deepest shame could she confess her close kindred with a creature so sunk in degradation.

Desrolles drank the brandy at a gulp, and then flung himself into the chair by the hearth.

‘And pray how long have you been married?’ he asked.

Laura’s face crimsoned at the question. It was just the one inquiry calculated to give her acutest pain; for it recalled all that was painful in the circumstances of her marriage.

‘We were married on the last day of last year,’ she said.

‘You have been a year married, and I only learn the fact to-night from the village gossips, at the inn where I stopped to eat a crust of bread and cheese on my way here.’

‘You might have seen the announcement in the *Times*.’

‘I might, but did not. Well, I suppose I surrendered a father’s rights when I gave my child to another man’s keeping; but it seems hard.’

‘Why pain yourself and me with useless reproaches. I am prepared to do all that duty can dictate. I am deeply anxious that your future life should be comfortable and respected. Tell me where you intend to live, and how I can best assure your happiness.’

‘Happiness!’ cried Desrolles, with a derisive shrug. ‘I have never known that since I was five-and-twenty. Where am I going to live, do you ask? Who knows? Not I, you may be sure. I am a wanderer by habit and inclination. Do you think I am going to shut myself in a speculative builder’s brick and mortar box—a semi-detached villa in Camden Town, or Islington—and live the monotonous life of a respectable annuitant. That kind of vegetation may suit a retired tradesman, who has spent three-fourths of his life behind the same counter. It would be living death to a man with a mind—a man who has travelled and lived among his fellow-men. No, my dear; you must not attempt to limit my movements by the inch-measure of middle-class respectability. Give me my pittance unfettered by conditions of any kind. Let me receive it quarterly from your London agent, and, since you repudiate my claim to your affection, I pledge myself never again to trouble you with my presence after to-night.’

‘I do not ask that,’ said Laura, thoughtfully.

‘It is only right that we should see each other sometimes. By the deception which you practised upon my benefactor, you have made it impossible that I should ever own you as my father before the world. Everybody in Hazlehurst believes that my father died when Jasper Treverton adopted me. But, to my husband, at least, I can own the truth: I have shrunk from doing so hitherto, but to-night, while we have been sitting here, I have been thinking that I have acted weakly and foolishly. John Treverton will respect your secret for my sake, and he ought to know it.’

‘Stop,’ cried Desrolles, starting to his feet, and speaking in a louder tone than he had used hitherto. ‘I forbid you to breathe a word of me or my business to your husband. When I revealed myself to you I pledged you to secrecy. I insist——’

He stopped and stood facing the door-way between the two rooms, staring aghast, horror-stricken, as if he had seen a ghost.

‘Great heaven!’ he exclaimed, ‘what brings you here?’

John Treverton stood in the open doorway, a tall, dark figure, in a long velvet dressing gown. Laura flew to his side.

‘Dearest, why did you get up?’ she cried. ‘How imprudent of you.’

‘I heard a voice raised as if threateningly. What has brought this man here—with you.’

‘He is the relation about whom you once questioned me, John,’ Laura answered, falteringly. ‘You have not forgotten.’

‘This man related to you?’ cried Treverton. ‘This man?’

‘Yes. You know each other.’

‘We have met before,’ answered Treverton, who had never taken his eyes from the other man’s face. ‘We last met under very painful circumstances. It is a surprise to find a relation of yours in Mr.——’

‘Mansfield,’ interrupted Desrolles. ‘I have changed the name of Malcolm for Mansfield—a name in my mother’s family—for Laura’s sake. It might be disadvantageous for her to own kindred with a man whom the world has played football with for the last ten years.’

Desrolles had grown ashy pale since the entrance of Laura's husband, and the hand with which he poured out his third glass of brandy shook like a leaf.

'Highly considerate on your part, Mr. Mansfield,' replied John Treverton. 'May I ask for what reason you have favoured my wife with this late visit?'

'The usual motive that brings a poor relation to a rich man's house. I want money, and Laura can afford to give it. Why beat about the bush?'

'Why, indeed. Plain dealing will be best in this case. I think, as it is a simple matter of business, you had better let me arrange it with you. Laura, will you leave your kinsman's claims for me to settle? You may trust me to take a liberal view of his position.'

'I will trust you, dearest, now and always,' answered his wife, giving him her hand, and then she went to Desrolles, and offered him the same frank hand, looking at him with tender earnestness. 'Good night,' she said, 'and good-bye. I beg you

to trust my husband, as I trust him. Believe me, it will be the best for all of us. He will be as ready to recognise your claim as I am, if you will only confide in him. If I have trusted him with my life, cannot you trust him with your secret ?’

‘ Good night,’ said Desrolles, curtly. ‘ I haven’t got over my astonishment yet.’

‘ At what ?’

‘ At finding you married.’

‘ Good night,’ she said again, on the threshold of the door, and then she came back to tell her husband not to fatigue or excite himself. ‘ I can only give you a quarter of an hour,’ she said to Desrolles. ‘ Pray remember that my husband is an invalid, and ought to be in bed.’

‘ Go to your school children, dearest,’ said Treverton, smiling at her anxiety. ‘ I shall be careful.’

The door closed behind Laura, and the two men—fellow-lodgers a year ago in Cibber Street—stood face to face with each other.

‘ So you are John Treverton ?’ said Desrolles,

wiping his lips with that tremulous hand of his, and looking with a hungry eye at the half empty decanter, looking anywhere rather than straight into the eyes of his fellow-man.

‘And you claim relationship with my wife?’

‘Nearer, perhaps, than you would care to hear; so near that I have some right to know how you, Jack Chicot, came to be her husband—how it was that you married her a year ago, at which period the lovely and accomplished Madame Chicot, whom I had the honour to know, was still living? Either that charming woman was not your wife, or your marriage with Laura Malcolm is invalid.’

‘Laura is my wife, and her marriage as valid as law can make it,’ answered John Treverton. ‘That is enough for you to know. And now be good enough to explain your degree of kindred with Mrs. Treverton. You say your real name is Malcolm. What was your relationship with Laura’s father?’

‘Laura urged me to trust you with my secret,’ muttered Desrolles, throwing himself into his former seat by the fire, and speaking like a man who is

calculating the chances of a certain line of policy. 'Why should I not be frank with you, Jack—Treverton? How much handier the old name comes! Had you been the punctilious piece of respectability I expected to meet in the heir of my old friend Jasper Treverton, I might have shrunk from telling you a secret that hardly redounds to my credit, from the churchgoer and ratepayer's point of view. But to you—Jack—the artist and Bohemian, the man who has tumbled on every platform and acted in every show at the world's fair—to you I may confide my secret without a blush. Come, fill me another glass, like a good fellow; my hand shakes as if I had the scrivener's palsy. You know the history of Jasper Treverton's adopted daughter?'

'I have heard it, naturally.'

'You have heard how Treverton, who had quarrelled with his friend Stephen Malcolm, about a foolish love affair, was summoned many years after to that friend's sick bed—found him dying, as every one supposed—then and there adopted Malcolm's only child, and carried her off with

him, leaving a fifty pound note to comfort his old friend's last moments and pay the undertaker?'

'Yes, I have heard all this.'

'But not what follows. When a doctor gives a patient up for dead, he is sometimes on the high road to recovery. Stephen Malcolm contrived to cheat the doctor. Perhaps it was the comfort provided by that fifty pound note, perhaps it was the knowledge that his only child's future was provided for,—anyhow, it seemed as if a burden had been lifted from the sick man's shoulders, for, from the time Jasper Treverton left him, he mended, got a new lease of life, and went out into the world again—a lonely wayfarer, happy in the knowledge that his daughter's fate was no longer allied with his, that whatever evil might befall him her lines were set in pleasant places.'

'Do you mean to tell me that Stephen Malcolm recovered—lived for years—and allowed his daughter to suppose herself an orphan, and his friend to believe him dead?'

'To tell the truth would have been to hazard his daughter's good fortune. As an orphan, and

the adopted child of a rich bachelor, her lot was secure. What would it have been if she had been flung back upon her actual father, to share his precarious existence. I considered this, and took the unselfish view of the question. I might have claimed my daughter back ; I might have sponged on Jasper. I did neither—I went my solitary way, along the stony highway of life, uncheered, unloved.'

'You !' cried John Treverton. 'You.'

'Yes. In me you behold the wreck of Stephen Malcolm.'

'You Laura's father ! Great heaven ! Why, you have not a feature, not a look in common with her. Her father ? This is indeed a revelation.'

'Your astonishment is not flattering to me. My child resembles her mother, who was one of the loveliest women I ever saw. Yet I can assure you —— Mr. —— Treverton, that at your age, Stephen Malcolm had some pretension to good looks.'

'I am not disputing that, man. You may have been as handsome as Adonis ; but my Laura's

father should have at least something of her look and air ; a smile, a glance, a turn of the head, a something that would reveal the mystic link between parent and child. Does she know this ? Does she recognise you as her father ?'

'She does, poor child. It is at her wish I have revealed myself to you.'

'How long has she known ?'

'It is a little more than five years since I told her. I had just returned from the Continent where I had spent seven years of my life in self-imposed exile. Suddenly I was seized with the outcast's yearning to tread his native soil again, and look upon the scenes of youth once more before death closes his eyes for ever. I came back—could not resist the impulse that drew me to my daughter—put myself one day in her pathway, and told her my story. From that time I have seen her at intervals.'

'And have received money from her,' put in John Treverton.'

'She is rich and I am poor. She has helped me to live.'

‘You might have lived upon the money she gave you a little more reputably than you were living in Cibber Street, when we were fellow-lodgers.’

‘What were my vices in Cibber Street? My life was inoffensive.’

‘Late hours and the brandy bottle—the ruin of body and soul.’

‘I have a chronic malady which makes brandy a necessity for me.’

‘Would it not be more exact to say that brandy is your chronic malady? Well, Mr. Mansfield, I shall make a proposition to you in the character of your son-in-law.’

‘I have a few words to say to you before you make it. I have told you my secret, which all the world may know, and welcome. I have committed no crime in allowing my old friend to suppose me dead. I have only sacrificed my own interests to the advantage of my daughter; but you, Mr. Treverton, have your secret, and one which I think you would hardly like to lay bare to the world in which you are now such an important personage. The master

of Hazlehurst Manor would scarcely care to be identified with Jack Chicot, the caricaturist, and husband—at least by common repute—of the dancer whose name used to adorn all the walls of London.

‘No,’ said Treverton, ‘that is a dark page in my life which I would willingly tear out of the book; but I have always known the probability of my finding myself identified with the past, sooner or later. This world of ours is monstrous big when a man tries to make a figure in it; but it’s very small when he wants to hide himself from his fellow-men. I have told my wife all I can tell her without stripping the veil from that past life of mine. To reveal more would be to make her unhappy. You can have no motive for telling her more than I have told her. I can rely on your honour in this matter?’

‘You can,’ answered Desrolles, looking at him curiously; ‘but I shall expect you to treat me handsomely—as a son-in-law, whose wealth has come to him through his marriage, should treat his wife’s father.’

‘What would you call handsome treatment?’ asked Treverton.

‘I’ll tell you. My daughter, who has a woman’s petty notions about money, has offered me six hundred a year. I want a thousand.’

‘Do you?’ asked Treverton, with half-concealed contempt. ‘Well, live a respectable life, and neither your daughter nor I will grudge you a thousand a year.’

‘I shall live the life of a gentleman. Not in England. My daughter wants to get me out of the country. She said as much just now; or, at any rate, what she did say implied as much. A continental life would suit my humour, and perhaps mend my health. Annuitants are long lived.’

‘Not when they drink a bottle of brandy a day.’

‘In a milder climate I may diminish the quantity. Give me a hundred in ready money to begin with, and I’ll go back to London by the first train to-morrow morning, and start for Paris at night. I ask for no father’s place at your Christmas table. I don’t want you to kill the fatted calf for me.’

‘I understand,’ said Treverton, with an invo-

luntary sneer, 'you only want money. You shall have it.'

He took a bunch of keys from his pocket, and unlocked a despatch box, in which he was in the habit of keeping money received from his steward before he sent it off to the bank. There was a little over a hundred pounds in the box, in notes and gold. John Treverton counted a hundred; the crisp notes, the bright gold, lay in a tempting heap on the table before him, but he kept his hand upon the money for a minute or two, while he sat looking at it with a meditative countenance.

'By the way, Mr. —— Mansfield,' he began, after that thoughtful silence, 'when, after a lapse of so many years, you presented yourself to your daughter, what credentials did you bring with you?'

'Credentials?'

'Yes. In other words, how did you prove your identity? You had parted with her when she was a child of six years old. Did her memory recall your features when she met you as a girl of seventeen, or did she take your word for the

fact that you were the father she had believed to be in his grave?’

‘She remembered me when I recalled myself to her. At first her memory was naturally vague. She had a dim recollection of my face, but no certainty as to when and where she had last seen it; until I recalled to her the circumstances of her childhood, the last days we spent together before my serious illness, her mother, the baby brother that died when she was three years old. John Treverton, you libel nature if you suppose that a daughter’s instinct can fail her when a father appeals to it. Had material proofs been wanted to convince my child that her father stood before her, I had those proofs, and I showed them to her—old letters, the certificate of her birth, her mother’s picture. The portrait I gave to Laura. I have the documents about me to-night. I have never parted with them.’

He produced a bloated pocket-book, the leather worn greasy with long usage, the silk lining frayed and ragged, and from this receptacle brought forth half-a-dozen papers, yellow with age.

One was the certificate of Laura Malcolm's birth. The other five were letters addressed to Stephen Malcolm, Esq., Ivy Cottage, Chiswick. One of these, the latest in date, was from Jasper Treverton.

'I am deeply grieved to hear of your serious illness, my poor friend,' he wrote; 'your letter followed me to Germany, where I have been spending the autumn at one of the famous mineral baths. I started for England immediately, and landed here half an hour ago. I shall come on as fast as rail and cabs can bring me, and indeed hope to be with you before you get this letter.

'Yours in all friendship,

'JASPER TREVERTON.

'The Ship Hotel, Dover,

'October 15th, 185—.'

The other letters were from friends of the past, like Jasper. One had enclosed aid in the shape of a post office order. The rest were sympathetic and regretful refusals to assist a broken-down acquaintance. The writers offered their impecunious friend every good wish, and benevolently com-

mended him to Providence. In every case the respectability and the respectful tone of Stephen Malcolm's correspondents went far to testify to the fact that he had once been a gentleman. There was a deep descent from the position of the man to whom these letters were written to the status of Mr. Desrolles, the second-floor lodger in Cibber Street.

So far as they went his credentials were undeniable. Laura had recognised him as her father. What justification could John Treverton find for repudiating his claim? For the money the man demanded he cared not a jot; but it pained him unspeakably to accept this dissipated waif, soaked in alcohol, as the father of the woman he loved.

'There is your hundred pounds, Mr. Mansfield,' he said, 'and since you have taught the little world of Hazlehurst to consider my wife an orphan, the less you show yourself here the better for all of us. Villages are given to scandal. If you were to be seen at this house, people would want to know who you are and all about you.'

‘I told you I should start for Paris to-morrow night,’ answered Desrolles, strapping his pocket-book, which was now distended to its uttermost with notes and gold. ‘I shan’t change my mind. I’m fond of Paris and Parisian ways, and know my way about that glorious city almost as well as you, though I never married a French wife.’

John Treverton sat silent, with his thoughtful gaze bent on the fire, apparently unconscious of the other man’s sneer.

‘Ta ta, Jack. Any message for your old friends in the Quartier Latin? No? Ah, I suppose the Squire of Hazlehurst has turned his back on the companions of Jack Chicot; just as King Harry the Fifth threw off the joyous comrades of the Prince of Wales. The desertion broke poor old Falstaff’s heart; but that’s a detail. Good night, Jack.’

Laura re-entered the room at this moment, and drew back startled at hearing her father address her husband with such friendly familiarity.

‘I have told Mr. Treverton everything, my dear,’ said Desrolles.

‘I am so glad of that,’ answered Laura, and then she laid her hand upon the old man’s shoulder, with more affection than she had ever yet shown him, and said, with grave gentleness, ‘Try to lead a good life, my dear father, and let us hear from you sometimes, and let us think of each other kindly, though Fate has separated us.’

‘A good life,’ he muttered, turning his blood-shot eyes upon her for a moment with a look that thrilled her with a sudden horror. ‘The money should have come sooner, my girl. I’ve travelled too far on the wrong road. There, good-bye, my dear. Don’t trouble yourself about an old scapegrace like me. Jack, send me my money quarterly to that address,’—he threw down a dingy looking card, ‘and I’ll never worry you again. You can blot me out of your mind, if you like; and you need never fear that my tongue will say an evil word of you, go where I may.’

‘I will trust you for that,’ answered John Treverton, holding out his hand.

Desrolles either did not see the gesture, or did

not care to take the hand. He snatched up his greasy-looking hat and hurried from the room.

‘Dearest, do you think any worse of me now you know that man is my father,’ asked Laura, when the door had closed upon Desrolles, and the bell had been rung to warn Trimmer of the guest’s departure.

‘Do I think any worse of a pearl because it comes out of an oyster,’ said her husband, smiling at her. ‘Dear love, if the parish workhouse were peopled with your relations, not one of them more reputable than Mr. Mansfield, my love and reverence for you would not be lessened by a tittle.’

‘You don’t believe in hereditary genius, then. You don’t think that we derive our characters mainly from our fathers and mothers.’

‘If I did I should believe that your mother was an angel, and that you inherited her disposition.’

‘My poor father,’ said Laura, with something between a sigh and a shudder. ‘He was once a gentleman.’

‘No doubt, love. There is no saying how low a man may descend when he once takes to travelling down-hill.’

‘If he had not been a gentleman my adopted father could never have been his friend,’ mused Laura. ‘It would not have been possible for Jasper Treverton to associate with anything base.’

‘No, love. And now tell me, when first your father presented himself to you, was not his revelation a great surprise, a shock to your feelings?’

‘It was indeed.’

‘Tell me, dear, how it happened. Tell me all the circumstances, if it does not pain you.’

‘No, dear. It pained me for you to know that my father had fallen so low, but now that you know the worst, I feel easier in my mind. It is a relief to me to be able to speak of him freely. Remember, Jack, he had bound me solemnly to secrecy. I would not break my promise, even to you.’

‘I understand all, dear.’

‘The first time I saw my father,’ Laura began falteringly, as if even to speak of him by that sacred name were painful to her, ‘it was summer time, a

lovely August evening, and I had strolled out after dinner into the orchard. You know the gate that opens from the orchard into the field. I saw a man standing outside it smoking, with his arms resting on the top of the gate. Seeing a stranger there, I turned away to avoid him, but before I had gone three steps he stopped me. "Miss Malcolm, for God's sake let me speak to you," he said. "I am an old friend whom you must remember." I went up to him and looked him full in the face; for there was such earnestness in his manner that it never occurred to me that he might be an impostor. "Indeed, I do not remember you," I said, "when have I ever seen you?" Then he called me by my Christian name. "Laura," he said, "you were six years old when Mr. Treverton brought you here. Have you quite forgotten the life that went before that time?"

She paused, and her husband drew her to the low chair by the fire, and seated himself beside her, letting her head rest on his shoulder.

'Go on, love,' he said, gently, 'but not if these memories agitate you.'

‘No, dear. It is a relief to confide in you. I told him that I did remember the time before I came to the Manor House. Some events I could remember distinctly, others faintly, like the shadows in a dream. I remembered being in France, by the sea, in a place where the fisherwomen wore bright-coloured petticoats and high caps, where I had children of my own age to play with, and where the sun seemed always shining. And then that life had changed to dull grey days in a place near a river, a place where there were narrow lanes, and country roads and fields; and yet there was a town close by with tall chimneys and busy streets. I remembered that here my mother was ill, lying in a darkened room for many weeks; and then one day my father took me to London in the omnibus, and left me in a large cold-looking house in a great square—a house where all the rooms were big and lofty, and had an awful look after our little parlour at home, and where I used to sit in a drawing-room all day with an old lady in black satin, who let me amuse myself as best I could. My father had told me that the old lady was his aunt, and

that I was to call her aunt, but I was too much afraid of her to call her anything. I think I must have stayed there about a week, but it seemed ages, for I was very unhappy, and used to cry myself to sleep every night when the maid had put me to bed in a large bleak room at the top of the house; and then my father came and took me home again in the red omnibus. I could see that he was very unhappy, and while we were walking in the lane that led to our house he told me that my dear mamma had gone away, and that I should never see her again in this world. I had loved her passionately, Jack, and the loss almost broke my heart. I am telling you much more than I told the stranger. I only said enough to him to prove that I remembered my old life.'

'And how did he reply?'

'He took a morocco case from his pocket and gave it into my hand, telling me to look at the portrait inside it. Oh, how well I remembered that sweet face. The memory of it flashed upon me like a dream one has forgotten and tried vainly

to recall, till it comes back suddenly in a breath. Yes, it was my mother's face. I could remember her looking just like that as she sat at work on the rocks by the sands where I played with the other children, at that happy place in France. I remembered her sitting by my cot every night before I fell asleep. I asked the stranger how he came to possess this picture. "I would give all the money I have in the world for it," I said. "You shall do nothing of the kind," he answered. "I give it you as a free gift, but I should not have done that if you had not remembered your mother's face. And now, Laura, look at me and tell me if you have ever seen me before?"

'You looked and could not remember him,' said John Treverton.

'No. Yet there was something in the face that seemed familiar to me. When he spoke I knew that I had heard the voice before. It seemed kind and friendly, like the voice of someone I had known long ago. He told me to try and realise what change ten years of evil fortune would make in a man's looks. It was not time only which had

altered him, he told me, but the world's ill-usage, bad health, hard work, corroding sorrow. "Make allowance for all this," he said, "and look at me with indulgent eyes, and then try to send your thoughts back to that old life at Chiswick, and say what part I had in it." I did look at him very earnestly, and the more I looked the more familiar the face grew. "I think you must be a friend of my father's," I said at last. "Poverty has no friends," he answered, "at the time you remember your father was friendless. Oh, child, child, can ten years blot out a father's image? I am your father."

Laura paused, with quickened breathing, recalling the agitation of that moment.

'I cannot tell you how I felt when he said this,' she continued, presently. 'I thought I was going to fall fainting at his feet. My brain clouded over; I could understand nothing; and then, when my senses came slowly back, I asked him how this could be true? Did not my father die a few hours after I was taken away by Jasper Treverton? My benefactor had told me that it was so. Then he—

my father—said that he had allowed Jasper Treverton to suppose him dead, for my sake; in order that I might be the adopted child of a rich man, and well placed in life, while he—my real father—was a waif and stray, and a pauper. Mr. Treverton had received a letter announcing his old friend's death—a letter written in a feigned hand by my father himself, and had never taken the trouble to inquire into the particulars of the death and burial. He felt that he had done enough in leaving money for the sick man's use, and in relieving him of all care about his daughter. This is what my father told me. How could I reproach him, Jack, or despise him for this deception, for a falsehood which so degraded him. It was for my sake he had sinned.'

'And you had no doubt as to his identity? You were fully assured that he was that very father whom you had supposed dead and buried ten years before?'

'How could I doubt? He showed me papers—letters—that could have belonged to no one but my father. He gave me my mother's portrait;

and then, through the mist of years, his face came back to me as a face that had been very familiar; his voice had the sound of long ago.'

'Did you give him money on this first meeting?'

'He told me that he was poor, a broken-down gentleman, without a profession, with bad health, and no means of earning his living. Could I, his daughter, living in luxury, refrain from offering him all the help in my power. I begged him to reveal himself to Mr. Treverton—papa, as you know I always called him—but he shrank, not unnaturally, from acknowledging a deception that placed him in such a false position. "No," he said, "I told a lie for your sake, I must stick to it for my own." I could not urge him to alter his resolution upon this point, for I felt how hard it would be for him to stand face to face with his old friend under such degrading circumstances. I promised to keep his secret, and I told him that I would send him all the money I could possibly spare out of my income, if he would give me an address to which I might send it.'

How often did you see him after this?' asked John Treverton.

'Before to-night, only three times. One of those occasions was the night on which you saw me admit him at the garden-door.'

'True,' said Treverton, blushing as he remembered the cruel suspicions that had been awakened in his mind by that secret interview. 'And you never told my cousin anything about your father?'

'Never. He made me promise to keep his existence a secret from all the world; and even if I had not been so bound, I should have shrunk from telling Mr. Treverton the cheat that had been practised upon him; for I felt that it was a cheat, however disinterested and generous the motive.'

'A purposeless cheat, I should imagine,' said John, musingly, 'for once having promised to take care of you, I should hardly think that my cousin Jasper would have flung you back upon poverty and gloomy days. No, love, once knowing your sweetness, your truthful, loving nature, it would not have been human to give you up.'

‘My poor father thought otherwise, unhappily.’

‘Dearest love, do not let this error of your father’s cast a shadow upon your life. I, who have known the shifts and straits to which poverty may bring a man, can pity and in some measure understand him. We will do all that liberality can do to make the remnant of his days respectable and happy.’

CHAPTER XIII.

DESROLLES IS NOT COMMUNICATIVE.

MR. DESROLLES left the Manor House a new man. He held his head erect, and bore himself with a lofty air, even before the butler who showed him out. He was respectabilised by a full purse. There was nothing left in him of the shabby, downcast stranger who had approached the house with an air of mingled mystery and apprehension. Trimmer hardly knew him. The man's seedy overcoat hung with the reckless grace of artistic indifference to attire, and not with the forlorn droop of beggary. His hat was set on with a debonair slant. He looked a Bohemian, a painter, an actor, a popular parson gone to the bad: anything rather than an undistinguished pauper. He flung Trimmer half-a-crown, with the lofty elegance of a Lauzun or a Richelieu, nodded a condescending good-night, and walked slowly along the gravel drive, humming

La Donna e mobile, with not an unskilful mimicry of him who, of all men that ever walked the boards of Covent Garden, looked and moved like a prince of the blood royal, and the thinnest thread of whose fading voice sent a thrill through every heart in the vast opera-house.

The snow was no longer falling. It lay in patches here and there upon the grass, and whitened the topmost edge of the moor, but there was an end of the brief snowstorm. The stars were shining in a deep blue sky, calm and clear as at midsummer. The moon was rising behind the dark ridge of moor. It was a scene that might have stirred the heart of a man fresh from the life of cities; but the thoughts of Desrolles were occupied in considering the new aspect given to affairs by his discovery of Jack Chicot in the young squire of Hazlehurst, and in calculating how he might best turn the occasion to his own peculiar profit.

‘A good, easy-going fellow,’ he reflected, ‘and he seems inclined to be open-handed. But if the dancer was his legal wife, and if he married Laura a year ago, that poor girl is no more his wife than

I am. Awkward for me to wink at such a position as that, in my paternal character; yet it might be dangerous for me to interfere.'

'Good evening, Mr. Desrolles,' said a voice close behind him.

He had been so deeply absorbed in self-interested speculations that he had not heard footsteps on the gravel. He turned sharply round, surprised at the familiar mention of his name, and encountered Edward Clare.

In that dim light he failed to recognise the man whom he had met in Long Acre, and talked with for about ten minutes, nearly a year ago.

'You seem to have forgotten me,' said Clare, pleasantly; 'yet we have met before. Do you remember meeting me in Long Acre one afternoon, and our talking together of your fellow-lodger, Mr. Chicot?'

'Your face and voice are both familiar to me,' said Desrolles, thoughtfully. 'Yes, you are the gentleman with whom I conversed for some minutes in the bar of the Rose Tavern. I remember your speaking of Hazlehurst. You belong to this part of the world, I presume?'

‘I do ; but I am rather surprised to see you in such an out-of-the-way nook and corner of the universe—on Christmas Eve, too——’

‘When I ought to be hanging up holly in my ancestral mansion, and kissing my grandchildren under the mistletoe,’ interjected Desrolles, with a harsh laugh. ‘Sir, I am a floating weed upon the river of life, and you need never be surprised to see me anywhere. I have no cable to moor me to any harbour, no dock but the hospital, no haven but the grave.’

Desrolles uttered this dismal speech with positive relish. He had a hundred pounds in his pocket, and the world before him where to choose. What did he want with dock or haven ? He was by nature a rover.

‘I am very glad we have met,’ said Edward, gravely ; ‘I have something serious to say to you—so serious that I would rather say it within four walls. Can you come with me to my house for half an hour, and let me talk to you over a tumbler of toddy ?’

Toddy had but little temptation for the brandy

drinker ; it was almost as if some one had offered him milk and water.

‘I want to get away by the mail,’ said Desrolles, doubtfully ; ‘and what the deuce can you have to say to me?’

‘Something of the utmost importance. Something that may put money in your purse.’

‘The suggestion provokes my curiosity. Suppose I forego the idea of the mail ? It’s a cold night, and I’ve had a good deal of travelling since morning. Does your village boast an inn where a man can get a decent bed ?’

‘Yes, they will make you comfortable at the George. You had better come home with me, and hear what I have to say. It’s a quarter past nine, and the mail goes at ten thirty. You could hardly do it, if you tried.’

‘Well, let the mail go without this Caesar and his fortunes ; I’ll hear what you have to say.’

They walked together to the Vicarage. Mr. and Mrs. Clare and Celia were still at the Manor House, where the Christmas-tree was being stripped by the tumultuous infants, with shouts of rapture

and shrill screams of delight. Edward had slipped out directly he had finished the 'Jackdaw,' under the pretence of smoking a cigar, and had gone round to the front of the house to watch for the unknown visitor's departure.

The Vicarage was wrapped in darkness, save in the servants' quarters, where some mild rejoicings were in progress. Edward let himself in at the hall door, and went up to his den, followed by Mr. Desrolles. The fire had burnt low, but there was a basket of wood by the hearth. Edward flung on a log, and lighted the candles on the table. Then he opened a cosy little corner cupboard in the panelling, and took out a black bottle, a couple of tumblers, and a sugar basin.

'If your whiskey's good, don't trouble to mix it,' said Desrolles; 'I'd rather taste it neat.'

He settled himself comfortably in the chair beside the hearth, the poet's own particular rocking chair, in which he was wont to cradle his fine fancies, and sometimes hush his genius to placid slumber.

'A tidy little crib,' said Desrolles, looking

curiously round the room, with all its masculine luxuries, and feminine frivolities. 'I wonder you should speak so disparagingly of a village in which you've such snug quarters.'

'The grub is snug in his cocoon,' retorted Edward, 'but that isn't life.'

'No. Life is to be a butterfly, at the mercy of every wind that blows. I think on the whole the grub has the best of it.'

'Help yourself,' said Edward, pushing the whisky bottle across the table to his visitor.

Desrolles filled a glass and emptied it at a draught. 'New and raw,' he said, disapprovingly. "Well, Mr. ——. By the way you did not favour me with your card when last we met.'

'My name is Clare.'

'Well, Mr. Clare; here I am. I have gone out of my own way to put myself at your disposal. What is this wondrous communication you have to make to me?'

'First, let us discuss your own position.'

'I beg your pardon,' exclaimed Desrolles, rising and taking up his hat. 'I did not come here to talk about

that. If you've set a trap for me you'll find you've got the wrong customer. I belong to the ferret tribe.'

'My dear fellow, don't be in such a hurry,' said Edward, putting up his white womanish hand in languid entreaty; 'as a prelude to what I have got to say I am obliged to speak of your own position with reference to Laura Treverton, and her husband, John Treverton, otherwise Jack Chicot.'

'What do you mean?'

'Simply what I say. John Treverton, squire of Hazlehurst, and Jack Chicot—Bohemian, adventurer, artist in black and white, unsuccessful painter in oils, what you will—are one and the same. It may suit Mr. Treverton to forget that he was ever Jack Chicot; but the story of his past life is not blotted out because he is ashamed of it. You know, and I know, that the present lord of Hazlehurst manor is Mrs. Evitt's old lodger.'

'You must be crazy to suggest such a thing,' said Desrolles, looking at the other with an air of half stupefied inquiry, as a man in whom he did verily perceive indications of insanity. 'The two men have not one attribute in common.'

‘If the man I saw talking to you in Long Acre was Chicot, the caricaturist, then Chicot and Treverton are one.’

‘My dear fellow, your eyes played you false. Possibly there may be a kind of likeness, as far as height, figure, complexion, go.’

‘I saw the man’s face at the magazine office, and I’ll swear it was Treverton’s face.’

Desrolles shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say, ‘Here is a poor half-cracked fellow labouring under a harmless delusion. I must indulge him.’

‘Well, my dear sir,’ he said presently, stretching his well-worn boots before the hearth, and luxuriating in the warmth of the blazing wood, ‘if this is all you have to say, you might as well have let me get away by the mail.’

‘You deny the identity of John Treverton and Chicot, the caricaturist.’

‘Most emphatically. I have the honour to know both men, and am in a position to state that they are totally distinct individuals—bearing a kind of resemblance to each other in certain

broad characteristics—height, figure, complexion—a resemblance that might mislead a man seeing one of the two for a few moments, as you saw Chicot——’

‘How do you know how often I saw Chicot?’

‘I draw my inference from your own conduct. If you had seen him often—if you had seen him more than once—you could not possibly mistake him for Mr. Treverton, or Mr. Treverton for him.’

Edward Clare shrugged his shoulders, and sat looking frowningly at the fire for some moments. Whatever this man Desrolles knew, or whatever he thought, it was evident that there was very little to be got out of him.

‘You are very positive,’ Edward said presently, ‘so I suppose you are right. After all I can have no desire to identify the husband of a woman I highly esteem with such a fellow as this Chicot. I want only to protect her interests. Married to a scoundrel, what might not be her fate? Perhaps as terrible as that of the dancer.’

Desrolles answered nothing. He was lying

back in the rocking chair, resting, his eyes half closed.

‘Have you seen Chicot since his wife was murdered?’ asked Edward, after a pause.

‘No one has seen him. It is my belief that he made straight for one of the bridges, and drowned himself.’

‘In that case his body would have been found, and his death made known to the police.’

‘You would not say that if you were a Londoner. How many nameless corpses do you think are fished out of the Thames every week—how many unrecognised corpses lie in the east-end deadhouses waiting for some one to claim them, and are never claimed or identified, and go to the paupers’ burial-ground without a name. The police did not know Chicot. They had only his description to guide them in their search for him. I am very clear in my mind that the poor devil put himself out of their way in the most effectual manner.’

‘You think he murdered his wife.’

Desrolles shrugged his shoulders dubiously.

‘I think nothing,’ he answered. ‘Why should I think the very worst of a man who was my friend? But I know he bolted. The inference is against his innocence.’

‘If he is alive it shall be my business to find him,’ said Edward savagely. ‘The crime was brutal—unprovoked—inexcusable—and if it is in my power to bring it home to him he shall suffer for it.’

‘You speak as if you had a personal animosity,’ said Desrolles. ‘I could understand the detectives being savage with him, for he has led them a pretty dance, and they have been held up to ridicule for their failure in catching him. But why you—a gentleman living at ease here—should feel thus strongly——’

‘I have my reasons,’ said Edward.

‘Well, I’ll wish you good night. It’s getting late, and I suppose the George is an early house. *Au revoir*, Mr. Clare. By the way, when you told me your name just now I forgot to ask you how you came to be so familiar with mine.’

‘I saw it in the newspapers, in the report of the inquest on Madame Chicot.’

‘True. I had told you that I was Jack Chicot’s fellow-lodger. I had forgotten that. Good night.’

‘You are still living in Gibber Street, I suppose?’

‘No, the house became hateful to me after that terrible event. Mrs. Evitt lost both her lodgers. Mrs. Rawber, the tragedienne, moved two doors off. My address is at the Poste Restante all over Europe. But for the next week or so I may be found at Paris.’

‘Good night,’ said Edward. ‘I must come down stairs and let you out. My people ought to be home by this time, and perhaps you may not care to meet them.’

‘It is indifferent to me,’ Desrolles answered, loftily.

They did not encounter the Vicar or his wife on the stairs. The children’s party had been kept up till the desperate hour of half-past ten, and Mr. and Mrs. Clare were now on their road home, leaving Celia behind them to spend Christmas Day with the Trevertons.

CHAPTER XIV.

EDWARD CLARE GOES ON A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

To sit besides a man's hearth, drink his wine, shoot his pheasants and ride his horses, would in a savage community be incompatible with the endurance of a deadly hatred against that man. The thoroughbred savage hates only his enemy and the intruding stranger. Mr. Stanley tells us that if he could once get close enough to a tribe to hold a parley with them, he and his followers were safe. The difficulty was that they had to encounter a shower of arrows before they could get within range for conversation. When the noble African found that the explorer meant kindly, he no longer thirsted for the white man's blood. His savagery for the most part meant self-defence.

The ways of civilisation are not as the ways of the desert. There are men and women whose

animosity is not to be appeased by kindness-- who will take all they can get from a man, and go on detesting him cordially to the end. Edward Clare, the sleek, white-handed poet, possessed this constancy in hatred. John Treverton had done him no direct injury: for the poet's love for Laura had never been strong enough to outweigh prudence. He had wanted Laura and Hazlehurst Manor: not Laura with her modest income of two hundred and fifty pounds a year. He was angry with fate and Jasper Treverton for the will which had made Laura's wealth dependent on her marriage with the heir: he hated John Treverton for the good fortune which had fallen into his lap. And this hatred wore such a noble aspect in the man's own mind. It was no base envy of another's prosperity; it was not even jealous anger against a rival, Edward told himself. No, it was a chivalrous ardour in the defence of the woman he had loved; it was a generous desire to serve her which urged him to pluck the mask from this smooth hypocrite's face. If this man was indeed, as Edward believed, the husband of Zaire Chicot, the

dancer, then his marriage with Laura was no marriage, and the conditions of the will had not been fulfilled. The estate, the possession of which could only be secured by a legal marriage within the year following Jasper Treverton's death, had been obtained by an audacious fraud.

Was this great wrong to pass undetected and unpunished? Was Laura, whose love had been so easily won by this scoundrel, to go on blindly trusting him; until some day an accident should reveal his infamy and her dishonour? No, Edward believed that it was his duty to let in the light upon this iniquitous secret; and he determined to leave no stone unturned in the fulfilment of his mission.

This fellow Desrolles was evidently a creature of John Treverton's. His denial of the identity between the two men went for nothing in Edward's mind. There must be plenty of people in the neighbourhood of Cibber Street able to identify the missing Chicot, if they could only be brought face to face with him.

'I wonder you and Mrs. Treverton have not been photographed since your marriage,' Edward

said, one afternoon in the Christmas week, when John Treverton was well enough to join the kettle-drum party in the book-room, and they four, Mr. and Mrs. Treverton, Celia, and Edward, were sitting round a glorious fire.

He had been looking over a volume of photographs by the light of the blazing wood, so the question seemed natural enough.

‘Ah, by-the-by, Jack, I really must have you photographed,’ said Laura, gaily. ‘Lady Barker was very particular in her request for our photographs the other day. She has a very fine collection, she tells me.

‘About a hundred and fifty of her bosom friends, I suppose,’ retorted John Treverton, ‘all simpering in the highest style of art, and trying to look unconscious of the photographer’s iron collar gripping them by the scruff of the neck. No, Laura, I am not going to let the sun make a correct map of my wrinkles in order that I may join the simperers in Lady Barker’s photograph album, that fashionable refuge for the destitute in brains, after a dull dinner.’

‘Do you mean to say that you have never been photographed?’ asked Edward.

‘No, I do not. I had my photograph taken by Nadar, a good many years ago, when I was young and frivolous.’

‘Oh, Jack, how I should like to have a picture of what you were years ago,” exclaimed Laura. ‘What has become of all the photographs?’

‘Heaven knows,’ answered John, carelessly; ‘given to Tom, Dick and Harry—scattered to the four winds. I have not kept one of them.’

‘Nadar,’ repeated Edward, musingly; ‘you are talking of the man in Paris, I suppose?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know Paris well?’

‘Every Englishman who has spent a fortnight there would say as much as that,’ answered John Treverton, carelessly. ‘I know my way from the Louvre to the Palais Royal, and I know two or three famous restaurants, where a man may get an excellent dinner, if he likes to pay for it with its weight in gold.’

Nothing more was said upon the subject of photographs. Edward Clare left Hazlehurst next day for London. He was not going to be long

away, he told his father and mother, but he wanted to see a manager who had made overtures to him for a legitimate historical drama, in blank verse.

‘He was struck by a dramatic fragment I wrote for one of the magazines,’ said Edward, ‘and he has taken it into his head that I could write as good a play as the “Hunchback” or the “Lady of Lyons.”’

‘Oh, do go and see him, Ted,’ cried Celia, with enthusiasm. ‘It would be awfully jolly if you were to write a play. We should all have to go up to town to see the first performance.’

‘Should we?’ interrupted the Vicar, without looking up from his *John Bull*, ‘and pray who would find the money for our railway fare, and our hotel bill?’

‘Why you, of course,’ cried Celia. ‘That would be a mere bagatelle. If Edward were to burst upon the world as a successful dramatic author he would be on the high road to fortune, and we could all afford a little extravagance. But who is your manager, Ted, and who are the actors who are to act in your play?’ inquired Celia, anxious for details.

‘I shall say nothing about that till my play is written and accepted,’ answered Edward. ‘The whole affair is in the clouds at present.’

Celia gave a short impatient sigh. So many of her brother’s literary schemes had begun and ended in the clouds.

‘I suppose I am to take care of your den while you are away,’ she said, presently, “and dust your books and papers?”

‘I shall be glad if you will preserve them from the profane hand of my mother’s last domestic treasure in the shape of a new housemaid,’ answered Edward.

Before any one could ask him any more questions the ’bus from the ‘George,’ was at the Vicarage gate, waiting to take him to the station at Beechampton ; in company with two obese farmers, and a rosy-cheeked girl going out to service, and carrying a nosegay of winter flowers, a bandbox, and an umbrella.

How sweet and fresh the air was in the clear December morning, almost the last of the year ! How picturesque the winding lane, the wide sweep of cultivated valley, and distant belt of hill and moor.

Edward Clare's eyes roamed across the familiar scene, and saw nothing of its tranquil beauty. His mind was absorbed in the business that lay before him. His heart was full of rancour. He was tormented by that worst of all foes to a man's peace—an envious mind. The image of John Treverton's good fortune haunted him like a wicked conscience. He could not go his own way, and forget that his neighbour was luckier than himself. Had Fate smiled upon his poetic efforts, had some sudden and startling success whisked him up into the seventh heaven of literary fame, at the same time tilling his pockets, he might possibly have forgiven John Treverton; but with the sense of failure goading him, his angry feelings were perpetually intensifying.

He was in the London streets just as dusk was falling, after a cold, uncomfortable journey. He took his travelling bag in his hand, and set out on foot to find a lodging, for his funds were scanty, as he had not ventured to ask his father for money since his return to the Vicarage. It was an understood thing that he was to have the run

of his teeth at Hazlehurst, and that his muse was to supply all other wants.

He did not go to the street where he had lodged before—a narrow, dismal street, between Holborn and the British Museum. He went to the more crowded quarter, bounded on one side by Leicester Square, on the other by St. Martin's Lane, and betook himself straight to Cibber Street. He had made up his mind to get a room in that uninviting spot, if any decent shelter were available there.

Before seeking for this accommodation elsewhere, he went to look at the house to which La Chicot's murder had given such an awful notoriety. He found it more reputable of aspect than when he had last seen it, a few days after the murder. A new wire blind shaded the lower part of the parlour window; new red curtains drooped gracefully over the upper panes. The window itself looked cleaner and brighter than it had ever looked during the stately Mrs. Rawber's occupation of the ground floor. A new brass plate on the door bore the inscription, 'Mr. Gerard, surgeon.'

Edward Clare contemplated this shining brass-

plate with the blank gaze of disappointment. He concluded, not unnaturally, that the whole house had passed into the possession of Mr. Gerard, surgeon, and that Mrs. Evitt had gone forth into the wilderness of London, where she would be more difficult to find than poor Hagar and her son in the sandy wastes of the great desert. While he stood ruminating upon this apparent change in the aspect of affairs, his eye wandered to a window looking upon the area beneath the parlour, from which there came a comfortable glow of light. The occupant of the basement had not drawn down the illuminated blind which generally shaded her domesticity from the vulgar eye; and, seated by her kitchen fire, indulging in the inexpensive luxury of slumber, Edward beheld that very Mrs. Evitt whom he had supposed lost in the metropolitan labyrinth. He had no doubt as to those corkscrew curls, that vinegar visage. This was the woman with whom he had talked for half an hour one bleak March morning, when he had inspected the scene of the murder, under the pretence of looking for lodgings.

He went up the steps to the door. There were two bells, one labelled 'SURGERY,' the other 'HOUSE.' Edward rang the latter, which was answered after an interval by the landlady, looking cross and sleepy.

At the sight of Mr. Clare, with his travelling bag in his hand, she scented a lodger, and brightened.

'Have you a decent bedroom to let, on your second floor?' he asked, for although he was no believer in the influences of the spirit world, he would have preferred spending the December night upon the bleakest and windiest of the bridges, to lying down to rest in the room where La Chicot had been slain.

"I've got my first floor empty," said Mrs. Evitt, "beautiful rooms, all new papered and painted."

'I'd rather go higher up,' answered Edward. You had a lodger named Desrolles. What has become of him?'

'Gone to travel in foreign parts,' replied the landlady. 'I believe he had money left him. He was quite the gentleman when he started—every-

think new, from his portmanceau to his railway rug.'

'Can I have his rooms for a few nights? I am only in town as a bird of passage, but I don't want to go to an hotel.'

'Their charges are so high, and there's no privacy in 'em,' said Mrs. Evitt, with a sympathetic air, as if she divined his inmost feelings. 'You can have Mr. Desrolles' rooms, sir, and we shan't quarrel about the rent.'

'The rooms are clean, I suppose?' Edward hazarded.

'Clean!' exclaimed Mrs. Evitt, lifting up her eyebrows with the indignation of outraged innocence. 'Nobody that has ever lodged with me would ask that question. Clean! No house of mine ever 'arbour'd dirt.'

'I should like to see the bedroom,' said Edward. 'The sitting-room matters very little. I shall be out all the day.'

'If you'll wait while I fetch a candle, I'll show you both rooms,' replied the landlady. 'I suppose you want to come in at once?'

‘Yes. I have just come from the country, and have no more luggage than this bag. I can pay you for the rooms in advance, if you like?’

‘Money comes uncommonly handy now that provisions have rose to such a heighth,’ returned Mrs. Evitt, with an insinuating air. ‘Not that I could ever feel an instant’s doubt respecting a young gent of your appearance.’

‘Money down is the best reference,’ said Edward. ‘I’m a stranger in London. Here’s a sovereign. I suppose that’ll square us if I only keep the rooms a week?’

‘There’ll be a trifle for boot-cleaning,’ insinuated Mrs. Evitt.

‘Oh, very well.’

‘And half-a-crown for kitching fire.’

‘Oh, come now, I won’t stand kitchen fire. You don’t suppose I’m going to dine here. If you bring me up a cup of tea of a morning it is all I shall want, and the fire that boils your kettle will boil mine.’

‘A trifle for attendance, then.’

‘I’ll promise nothing. If you make me comfortable, I shall not forget you at parting.’

‘Very well, sir,’ sighed the landlady. ‘I suppose it will come to the same in the end, but I always think it best for all parties to put things clear.’

She retired into the darkness at the end of the narrow passage, the dark brown wainscot of which was dimly lighted by an old-fashioned oil lamp, and returned in a minute or two with a tallow candle in a capacious tin candlestick. With this light she preceded Mr. Clare up the staircase, whose shallow uneven steps, and heavy balustrade gave evidence of its age.

On the first-floor landing Mrs. Evitt paused to recover her breath, and Edward felt an icy thrill of horror as he found himself opposite the bedroom door.

‘Is that the room where that poor woman was murdered?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Mrs. Evitt, with a deprecating sigh, ‘it is the room, and I won’t deceive you. But it has been done up so nice that nobody as ever knew it before would be able to recognise it. My

landlord acted very liberal ; “ anything that paint and paper can do to set you right with your lodgers, Mrs. Evitt, shall be done,” says he. “ You’ve been a good tenant,” says he, “ always punctual to the minute with your rent,” he says, “ and I should take it to heart if you was to suffer.” Come in and look at the room, sir, and you’ll see that there isn’t a more cheerful bedroom in this part of London.’

Mrs. Evitt flung open the door with a flourish of pride, and led the way into the room with up-lifted candlestick.

‘ That’s a brand new bedstead,’ she said, ‘ from Maples, in Tottenham Court Road, where all the crowned ’eds gets their furniture. And there aint a inch of carpet or a bit of bedding that was in the room when — when — what you mentioned took place.’

Mrs. Evitt had pinned her faith upon vivid colour as a charm to exorcise poor Zaire’s ghost. A sixpenny chintz of all the colours in the rainbow draped window and bed. A painted drugget of corresponding violence hid the worm-eaten old boards, upon which soap, sand, and soda had been

vainly expended in the endeavour to remove the dark traces of that awful stream which had travelled from the bed to the threshold. The dressing-table was draped with white muslin and rose-coloured calico. The chimney-piece was resplendent with a pair of Bohemian glass vases, and a gilded clock. Coloured lithographs in the vilest German art brightened the walls.

‘Don’t it look cheerful?’ asked Mrs. Evitt.

‘Is that the little room where the husband used to work?’ inquired Edward, pointing to the door.

‘Yes, but that doesn’t go with the drawing-room floor. I’ve let it to Mr. Gerard for a room to put his books in. He’s such a man for books. They overrun the place.’

‘Who is Mr. Gerard? Oh by-the-way, that is the surgeon downstairs. How long has he been lodging with you?’

‘It was about a month after poor Madame Chicot’s death when he came. “I’m going to set up in business for myself Mrs. Evitt,” he says. “I aint rich enough to buy a practice,” says he, “so

I must try and make one for myself, somehow," he says. "Now yours is a crowded neighbourhood, and I think I might do pretty well here, if you let me your ground-floor cheap. It would be for a permanency," says he, "so that ought to make a difference." "I'll do my best to meet you," says I, "but my rent is high, and I never was a hour behind with it yet, and I never will be." Well, sir, I let him have the rooms very low, considering their value, for I was that depressed in my sperrits it wasn't in me to 'aggle. That ungrateful viper, Mrs. Rawber—a woman I'd waited on hand and foot, and fried onions for her until I've many a time turned faint over the frying-pan—and she's gone and turned her back upon me in my trouble, and took a first-floor over a bootmaker's, where the smell of the leather must be enough to poison a respectable female!'

'Has Mr. Gerard succeeded in getting a practice?' asked Edward.

'Well, he do have patients,' answered the landlady, dubiously; 'gratis ones a many, between the hours of eight and nine every morning. He's

very steady and quiet in his habits, and that moderate that he could live where another would starve. He's a wonderful clever young man, too: it was him—much more than the grand doctor—that pulled Madame Chicot through, after her accident.'

'Indeed!' said Edward, becoming suddenly interested; 'then Mr. Gerard knew the Chicots?'

'Knew 'em! I should think he did, indeed, poor young man! He attended Madame Chicot night and day for months, and if it hadn't been for him I believe she'd have died. There never was a doctor so devoted, and all for love. He didn't take a penny for his attendance.'

'A most extraordinary young man,' said Edward.

They went up to the second-floor, and Mr. Clare was introduced to the apartments upon which Desrolles had turned his back for ever. The furniture was of the shabbiest, but the rooms looked tolerably clean, much cleaner than they had appeared during the occupation of Mr. Desrolles. Edward flung down his travelling-bag, and expressed himself contented with the accommodation.

'Don't put me into damp sheets,' he said, where-

upon Mrs. Evitt threw up her hands in horror, and almost wept as she protested against so heartless an imputation.

‘There isn’t a carefuller woman than me about airing linen in all London,’ she exclaimed. ‘I’m over-particular. I’ve scorched many a good piller-case in my carefulness ; but I’m the only loser by that, and I don’t mind.’

‘I must go and get some dinner,’ said Edward. ‘And then I think I’ll drop in at a theatre. I suppose you can give me a latch-key.’

‘You can have the very key that Mr. Desrolles had,’ replied Mrs. Evitt, graciously, as if according a peculiar privilege.

‘I don’t care whose key it is as long as it will open the door,’ answered the unappreciative poet ; and then he put the key in his pocket, and went out to regale himself cheaply at a French restaurant, and then to the pit of a popular theatre. He had come to London on a particular errand, but he meant to get as much pleasure out of his visit as he could.

From the moment that Edward Clare heard

of George Gerard's attendance upon Madame Chicot he became desirous of making Mr. Gerard's acquaintance. Here was a man who could help him in the business he had to carry through. Here was a man who must know the dancer's husband intimately—a man who could identify Jack Chicot in the present Squire of Hazlehurst. This was the man of men whom it was valuable for Edward Clare to know. Having once made up his mind upon this point, Mr. Clare did not lose any time in making use of his opportunities. He called upon Mr. Gerard on the morning after his arrival in town. It was only half-past eight when he presented himself at the surgeon's door, so anxious was he to secure an interview before Mr. Gerard left home.

He found George Gerard sitting at his modest breakfast of bread and butter and coffee, an open book beside him as he eat. Edward's eyes marked the neatness of the surgeon's attire, marked also that his coat had been worn to the last stage of shabbiness at all compatible with respectability. A month's wear more and the wearer

would be out at elbows. He observed also the thick slices of bread and butter—the doubtful-looking coffee, with an odour suggestive of horse-beans. Here, evidently, was a man for whom the struggle of life was hard. Such a man would naturally be easy to deal with.

George Gerard rose to receive his guest with a pleasant smile.

‘Mrs. Evitt told me that you wanted to see me,’ he said, waving his hand to a chair beside his somewhat pinched fire.

A scientific arrangement of fire brick had been adapted to the roomy old grate since Mrs. Rawber’s tenancy, and it now held a minimum of fuel.

‘Yes, Mr. Gerard, I very much want half an hour’s talk with you.’

‘I can give you just half an hour before I start for my day’s work,’ answered Gerard, with a business-like air and a glance at the neat little clock on the chimney piece.

The room was curiously changed since Mrs. Rawber’s occupation. It had then appeared the model of the vulgar lodging-house parlour. It

now looked the room of a student. George Gerard had been able to spend very little money on the decoration of his apartments, but he had lined the walls with deal shelves, and the shelves were filled with books: such volumes as your genuine book hunter collects with loving toil in the lanes and by-ways of London. He had put a substantial old-fashioned writing table in the window, a pair of comfortable arm-chairs by the hearth, a skeleton clock, and a couple of bronze figures—picked up in one of the back slums of Covent Garden for a song—on the mantel-piece. The general effect was of a room which a gentleman might occupy without a blush.

Edward Clare saw all this, not without a sharp pang of envy. He recognised, in the capacity to endure such an existence, the power to climb the rugged hill of fame.

‘This is the kind of fellow to succeed in life,’ he thought. ‘But one can’t expect this dogged endurance in a man of poetic temperament.’

‘Do you wish to consult me professionally?’ asked Gerard.

‘No. What I have to say relates to a very serious matter, but it is neither a professional question for you, nor a personal affair of mine. You knew the Chicots.’

It was Gerard’s turn to be interested. He looked at the speaker with sudden intensity, which brightened every feature in his face.

‘Yes. What of them? Did you know them? I never saw you here when she was ill. You knew them in Paris, perhaps?’

‘No; I never saw Madame Chicot off the stage. But I am deeply interested in the discovery of her murderer: not for my own sake, but for the protection of some one I esteem. Have you seen John Chicot since the murder?’

‘No. If I had——’

George Gerard stopped suddenly, and left his sentence unfinished.

‘If you had you would have given him up to the police, as his wife’s murderer. Is that what you were going to say?’

‘Something very near it. I have strong reason to believe that he killed her; and yet there is

ground for doubt. If he were the murderer why should he alarm the house? He might have gone quietly away, and the crime would not have been discovered for hours afterwards.'

'An excess of caution, no doubt. Murderers often over-act their parts. Yet, if you look at the thing you will see he was obliged to give the alarm. Had he not done so, had he gone away and left his wife lying dead, it would have been obvious that he, and he alone, was her assassin. By rousing the household he put on at least the semblance of innocence, however his flight might belie it afterwards.'

'It is a profound mystery,' said Gerard.

'A mystery only to those who refuse to accept the natural solution of the enigma. Here was a man with a drunken wife. It is an acknowledged fact, I believe, that Madame Chicot was a drunkard?'

'Yes, poor soul. He might have let her kill herself with the brandy bottle. He would not have had long to wait.'

'A man so fettered may get desperate. Sup-

pose that I could prove to you that this Chicot had the strongest possible temptation to rid himself of his wife by any means, fair or foul. Suppose I could tell you that his inheritance of a large estate was contingent upon his marriage with another woman, that he had already, in order to secure that estate, contracted a bigamous marriage with that other woman—she innocent as an angel, poor girl, throughout the plot. Suppose I could prove all this, what would you say of Jack Chicot then?’

‘Most assuredly I would say that he did the deed. Only show me that he had a motive strong enough to urge him to crime—I know of my own experience that he was tired of his wife—and I will accept the evidence that points to him as the murderer.’

‘Do you think that evidence strong enough to convict him?’

‘On that point I am doubtful. His flight is damning evidence against him; and then there is the fact that at the bottom of his colour-box there lay a dagger which corresponded in form to

the gash upon that poor creature's throat. I found that dagger, and it is now in the possession of the police. It bears the dark tarnished stain that blood leaves upon steel, and I have no doubt in my own mind that it was with that dagger La Chicot was killed. But these two points comprise the whole evidence against the husband. They are strong enough to afford a presumption against his innocence; but I doubt if they are strong enough to hang him.'

'Let it be so. I don't want to hang him. But I do want to rescue the woman I once fondly loved—for whom I still care more than for any other woman on earth—from a marriage that may end in her misery and untimely death. What must be the fate of such a man as this Chicot, if he is, as you believe, and as I believe, guilty? Either remorse will drive him mad, or he will go on from crime to crime, sinking lower in the scale of humanity. Let me but strip the mask from his face, separate him for ever from his innocent wife, and I am content. To do this I want your aid. Jack Chicot has disappeared from

the ken of all who knew him. The man who bore that name is now a gentleman of landed estate, respected and respectable. Will you be disinterested enough to waste a couple of days, and travel over three hundred miles, in order to help me to identify the late adventurer in the present lord of the manor. Your journey shall not cost you sixpence.'

'If I go at all, I shall go at my own expense,' answered Gerard curtly; 'but you must first show me an adequate reason for doing what you ask.'

'To do that I must tell you a long story,' answered Edward.

And then, without mentioning the names of people or of places, he told the story of Jasper Treverton's will, and of Laura Malcolm's marriage. The facts, as he stated them, went far to show John Treverton a scheming scoundrel, capable of committing a crime of the darkest kind to further his own interest.

'The case against him looks black, I admit,' said Gerard, when Clare had finished. 'But there is one difficult point in the story. You say that

in order to secure the fortune Chicot married the young lady in the January before Madame Chicot's death. Now if he had made up his mind to get rid of his lawful wife by foul means, why did he not do it before he contracted that marriage instead of afterwards? The crime would have been the same, the danger of detection no greater. The murder committed after the second marriage was an anachronism.'

'Who can fathom his motives? He may have had no design against his wife's life when he married the lady I know. He may have believed it possible to so arrange his life that no one would ever recognise Jack Chicot in the country Squire. He may have thought that he could buy his freedom from Madame Chicot. Perhaps it was only when he found that her love, or her jealousy, was not to be hoodwinked that he conceived the idea of murder. No man—assuredly, no man of decent antecedents—reaches the lowest depth of iniquity all at once.'

'Well,' sighed Gerard, after a pause, 'I will go with you, and see this man. I had a curious in-

terest in that poor creature's career. I would have done much to save her from the consequence of her own folly, had it been possible. Yes, I will go with you, I should like to know the end of the story.'

It was agreed between the two young men that they were to go to Devonshire together in the first week of the new year, Edward Clare remaining only a week in London. Gerard was to accompany Clare as his friend, and to stay at the Vicarage as his guest.

CHAPTER XV.

GEORGE GERARD.

JOHN TREVERTON was out of the doctor's hands before Christmas was over, and able to appear on his mare Black Bess, with his wife, mounted on the gentlest of grey Arabs, at the lawn meet which was held at the Manor House on New Year's Day. It was the first time the hounds had met there since the death of old John Treverton, Jasper's father, who had been a hunting man. Jasper had never cared for field sports, and had subscribed to the hounds as a duty. But now, John Treverton, the younger, who loved horses and hounds, as it is natural to an Englishman to love them, meant that things should be as they had been in the days of his great uncle, generally known among the elder section of the community as 'the old Squire.' He had bought a couple of hunters and a first-rate hack for himself, an Arabian, and a smart cob for his wife; and Laura and he had ridden for many a mile over

the moor in the mild afternoons of early autumn, getting into good form for the work they were to do in the winter.

Laura took kindly to the cob, and petted the Arab to a distracting degree. After a month's experience on the moors, and a good many standing jumps over furze and water, she began to ride really well, and her husband looked forward to the delight of piloting her across the country in pursuit of the red deer, before the hunting season was over. But he meant, if he erred at all, to err on the side of caution, and on this New Year's Day he had declared that he should only take Laura quietly through the lanes, and let her have a peep at the hounds from a distance. Celia, in the shortest of habits, a mere petticoat, and the most coquettish of hats, was mounted on her father's steady-going roadster, a stalwart animal of prodigious girth, which contemplated the hounds with unvarying equanimity.

‘What has become of your brother?’ Laura asked, as she and Celia waited about, side by side, watching the assembling of the field. ‘I haven’t seen him since my childrens’ party.’

Oh, didn't I tell you? He is in London making arrangements about a play that he is to write for one of the big theatres. Mother had a letter from him this morning. He is coming home the day after to-morrow, and he is going to bring a London acquaintance to stay two or three days at the Vicarage. A young doctor, good-looking, clever, a bachelor. Now, Laura, don't you really think the world must be coming to an end very soon?'

'No, dear; but I congratulate you on the bachelor. He will be an acquisition. You must bring him to us.'

'Oh, but Edward says he can only stay two or three days. He has his practice to attend to. He is only coming for a breath of country air.'

'Poor fellow. What is his name?'

'Edward did not tell us that. Something horrid, I daresay. Smith or Jones, or Johnson—a name to dispel all pleasant illusions.'

'Here comes Mr. Sampson.'

'Yes, on the horse he drives in his dog-cart. Could you believe, Laura, that a horse could support existence with so much bone and so little flesh?'

This was all Laura heard about the expected guest at the Vicarage, but poor Celia was in a flutter of wondering anticipation for the next two days. She took particular pains to make her brother's den attractive, yet sighed as she reflected how much of the stranger's brief visit would be spent within the closed doors of that masculine snugger.

'I wonder whether he is fond of tea,' she mused, when she had given the last heightening touch to the multifarious frivolities of the poet's study; 'and whether I shall be allowed to join them at kettledrum. Very likely he is one of those dreadfully mannish men who hate to talk to girls, and look glum whenever they're forced to endure women's society. A doctor? scientific, perhaps, and devoted to dry bones. Edward calls him handsome; but I daresay that was only said in order to prepossess us in his favour, and secure a civil reception for him.'

Thus, in maiden meditation, mused the damsel on that January evening when her brother and her brother's friend were expected. The omnibus from the 'George,' was to bring them from the station,

and that omnibus would be due at a quarter-past seven. It was now striking seven by the deep-toned church clock: a solemn chime that had counted out Celia's hours ever since she could remember. She hardly knew time or herself out of earshot of that grave old clock.

'Seven,' she exclaimed, 'and my hair anyhow.'

She slipped off to her room, lighted her dressing-table candles, and took up her hand mirror, the better to survey the edifice of frizzy little curls which crowned her small, neatly shaped head.

'Shine out, little head, sunning over with curls,' she sang gaily, smiling at herself in the glass, as she put her pet ringlets in their proper places, and smoothed the corner of an eyebrow with her little finger.

'What a blessing not to be obliged to powder, and to have lips that are naturally red,' she said to herself. 'It might almost reconcile one to be buried alive in a village.'

She put on her prettiest gown in honour of the visitor. It was by no means an elaborate costume. There were no intricacies of style, no artistic com-

binations of material. Celia's best indoor gown was only a dark green French merino, brightened by a good deal of ribbon, artfully disposed in unexpected bows and knots, and floating sash ends. Happily, the colour suited Celia's complexion, and the soft fabric fell in graceful folds upon her slender figure. Altogether Celia felt herself looking nice, when she put out her candles and ran downstairs.

A substantial tea-dinner was waiting for the travellers in the dining-room, to the sore discomfort of the vicar, who hated a tea-dinner, and was accustomed to dine at a punctual half-past six.

'Why must we have a makeshift meal of this kind?' he asked, fretfully. 'Why couldn't these young men be here in time for our regular dinner?'

'Why because there was no train to bring them, you dear, stupid, old pater,' retorted the flippant Celia. 'I'm sure the table looks quite too lovely.'

A fine piece of cold roast beef at the end opposite the urn and tea-tray, a pigeon pie, a salad, an apple pasty, a home-made cake or two, diamond

cut jars of marmalade and jam, and a noble glass bowl of junket, did not promise badly for two hungry young men; but the vicar looked across the board, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, and found it all barren.

‘I suppose nobody has thought of ordering anything hot for me,’ he remarked with an injured air.

It was a tradition in the family that the Vicar could not eat a cold dinner. It was not that he would not, but that he could not. The consequences were too awful. No one but himself knew the agonies which he suffered if he was forced to dine on cold beef or mutton. His system could accommodate lobster, he could even reconcile nature to cold chicken, but his internal economy would have nothing to do with cold mutton or beef.

‘Dearest creature,’ said Celia, raising herself on tiptoe in order to caress her father’s iron grey beard, ‘there is a particular dish of cutlets for you, with the mushroom sauce your soul loveth.’

The Vicar gave a sigh of satisfaction, and just

at that moment the wheels of the omnibus sounded on the road outside, the Vicarage gate fell back with a clang, and Mr. Clare and his daughter went out to receive the travellers, while Mrs. Clare, who had been indulging herself with a nap by the drawing-room fire, opened her eyes, and began to wonder vaguely whether it was night or morning.

What sort of man did Celia behold when she went into the lamplit hall, sheltering herself shyly under her father's wing, to welcome her brother and his guest? Not at all the kind of young man she expected to see, yet his appearance impressed her favourably, notwithstanding. He was strikingly original, she told Laura afterwards, and that in an age of hum-drum was much. She saw a tall, broad-shouldered man, with marked features, well shaped yet somewhat rugged, a pale complexion slightly pitted with smallpox, black hair and beard, dark grey eyes, with a wonderful power and light in them, under thick black brows.

'The idea of calling this stern-looking creature handsome,' thought Celia, while her father and

Mr. Gerard were shaking hands, and then in the next instant the stern-looking creature smiled, and Celia admitted to herself that his smile was nice.

‘You must be desperately hungry,’ said the Vicar, ‘unless you’ve dined on the way.’

‘Dined on the way,’ echoed Edward, peevishly. ‘We’ve travelled third-class, and we’ve had nothing but a split soda and a couple of Abernethy biscuits since nine this morning.’

‘Poor dear things,’ cried Celia, with intense pity, ‘but I can’t help being rather glad, for you will so enjoy your tea.’

Edward had introduced his friend to his father and sister, and now presented him to Mrs. Clare, who came out of the drawing-room smiling blandly, and trying not to look sleepy.

They all went into the dining-room, where the table which the Vicar had despised seemed to the two young men a land of promise. The urn hissed, and Celia made the tea, while Mrs. Clare sat at the other end of the board and carved the beef with a liberal, motherly hand. It was quite a merry party, for George Gerard had plenty to

say for himself, and the Vicar was pleased to get hold of an intelligent young man, fresh from London, and steeped to the lips in the knowledge of metropolitan politics, which are about a month ahead of rural politics. They sat at table for an hour and a half, and the three-quarters of an hour during which Gerard leaned back in his chair, talking to Celia on one side and the Vicar on the other, and consuming numerous cups of tea, was in that young man's estimation the pleasantest part of the time.

It was long, very long, since Gerard had found himself in so bright a room; or in such agreeable company. The homelike air of his surroundings warmed his heart, which had been chilled by long homelessness. The family history that lay behind his hard career was not a happy one. A profligate father wasting his opportunities and squandering his resources, a mother struggling nobly against adversity, trying against all disadvantages to maintain, by her own efforts in art and literature, a home for her unworthy husband and her idolised son. A boyhood at a

cheap Scotch university, and, just on the threshold of manhood, the loss of this patient, dearly loved mother, some years a widow. And then the young man had found himself face to face with stern necessity, and in a hard, indifferent world that knew nothing of him and cared nothing for him.

He had begun the battle of life with a determination to place himself among those who conquer. His ambition was hard and bitter. He had none of those incentives to effort that sweeten toil, where a man knows that he is working for mother, or wife or children. There was no creature of his own race to rejoice in his success, or to compassionate his ill-fortune. If nature had not made him of strong stuff he would most likely have drifted to the gutter. For a weaker soul the unaided struggle would have been too dreary.

Happily for George Gerard he loved his profession for its own sake. That love stood him in the stead of human sympathy and human affection. A word of commendation from one of the famous

men at the hospital, a word of gratitude from one of his own patients, the knowledge that he had managed a case well, these things cheered and sustained him, and he tramped along the difficult road with a bold front and a lofty heart, sure of success at the end of it, if he but lived to reach the end.

To-night he abandoned himself to the new delight of pleasant society. A bright room, furnished with that heterogeneous comfort which marks the gradual growth of a family dwelling; dark crimson curtains drawn across the broad bay window; family portraits on the walls; lamps on the table, candles on the mantelpiece and side-board; a fire heaped high with wood and coal; the Vicar's favourite colley stretchèd luxuriously on the hearth rug.

'I don't think I will go into the drawing-room, to-night,' said the Vicar, wheeling his chair round to the fire when the table had been cleared. 'I'm sure you haven't so good a fire as this in there.'

Mrs. Clare admitted that the drawing-room fire was not so good as it might be.

‘Very well, then, we’ll finish the evening here. If these two young men want to smoke, they can go to Ted’s room.’

Mr. Gerard declared that he did not want to smoke. He was much too comfortable where he was. And then the Vicar began to question him about his profession, what such and such men were doing, and what these new men were like who had won reputation lately. Gerard talked best when he talked of his own calling, and Celia, working point lace in a corner by the fire, thought that he looked really handsome when he was animated. It was a face so different from all those prosperous, fresh-coloured, country-bred faces that her daily life had shown her; a face marked with the strongest determination, vivified by a powerful intellect. The girl’s observant eye noted every characteristic in that interesting countenance. She saw, too, that the young man’s black frock coat had undergone harder wear than any garment she had ever seen worn by her brother: that his boots were of a thick and useful kind, and lacked the style of a fashionable maker; that he wore a silver

watch-chain, and exhibited none of the trinkets affected by prosperous youth.

Now Celia Clare was not fond of poverty. She considered it a necessary evil, but liked to give it as wide a berth as possible. Any visiting she did amongst her father's poor went sorely against the grain; and she always wondered how it was that Laura got on so well with the distressed classes. Yet she felt warmly interested in this young doctor, who was evidently most uninterestingly poor.

CHAPTER XVI.

THOU ART THE MAN.

THE next day was Sunday. George Gerard was up as soon as it was light, and off for a ramble on the moor before the nine o'clock breakfast. This glimpse of the country was sweet to him even in the bleak January weather, and he wanted to make the most of his brief opportunity. When he came back to the Vicarage after his walk, he found Edward Clare smoking a cigar in the shrubbery.

‘What a fellow you are to be rambling about in such wintry weather!’ cried Edward, by way of salutation. ‘I want a few minutes talk before we go in to breakfast. We may not get a chance of being alone afterwards. Celia is so fussy on Sunday mornings. I should like you to go to church with us, if you don’t object?’

‘I had made up my mind to go. I hope you don’t suppose I have an antipathy to churches?’

‘One never knows how that may be. I don’t imagine there’s much church-going among young professional men in London.’

‘I used to escort my mother to church every Sunday morning when I was a little boy, and those were my happiest days. If I didn’t like the Sunday morning service for its own sake, I should like it because it puts me in mind of her.’

‘Ah,’ sighed Edward, ‘I dare say when a fellow loses his mother early in life he feels sentimental about her ever afterwards. But when a mother gets to the elderly and twaddly age, one may be fond of her, but one can’t feel poetical about her. I’ll tell you why I want you to go to church with us, Gerard. John Treverton is sure to be there. It will be a capital opportunity for you to take stock of him. Our pew is just opposite the Manor House pew. You’ll have him in full view all through the service.’

‘Very good,’ assented Gerard. ‘If this Mr. Treverton and Jack Chicot are the same, I shall know him wherever I see him.’

Celia was in excellent spirits all breakfast-

time, and poured out tea and coffee with a vivacity and a grace worthy of French comedy. The presence of a strange, young man had a wonderfully brightening influence. Celia felt grateful to her brother for having afforded this unaccustomed variety in the monotonous course of rural life. She took more pains than usual in putting on her bonnet for church, though that was an operation which she always performed carefully; and she happened somehow to be walking by Mr. Gerard's side for the few hundred yards between the vicarage and the lych-gate.

The vicarage party were amongst the first arrivals. There were only the charity children in the gallery, and a few gaffers and goodies in the free seats. The gentry dropped in slowly. Here was Mr. Sampson, the lawyer, looking his sandiest, accompanied by Miss Sampson, in a distinctly new bonnet. Here was Lady Barker, short and fat and puffy, in an ancient velvet mantle, bordered with brown fur, like a common councillor's cloak on Lord Mayor's Day, and with a bonnet that reached the climax of dowdiness—but when

one is Lady Barker, and has lived in the same house for five-and-thirty years, it matters very little what one wears.

Here came the Pugsleys, the retired ironmonger and his wife, from Beechampton, Mrs. Pugsley, positively gorgeous in velvet and sable, and with a bird of many colours in her bonnet. Next arrived Mrs. Daracott, the rich widow, whose husband was the largest tenant farmer in the district, and who looked as if all Hazlehurst belonged to her; and here, after a sprinkling of nobodies, came John Treverton and his wife.

The vicar gave out a New Year's hymn two minutes after this last arrival, and the congregation rose.

'The man is marvellously changed,' George Gerard said to himself as he stood face to face with John Treverton, 'but he is the man I knew in Cibber Street, and no other.'

Yes, it was Jack Chicot. Happiness had given new life and colour to the face, prosperity had softened the harshness of its outline. The hollow cheeks had filled, the haggard eyes had recovered

the glory and gladness of youth. But the man was there—the same man in whose face Gerard had looked a year and a half ago, reading the secret of his loveless marriage.

Did he look like an undetected murderer? Did he look like a man tormented by remorse, weighed down with the burden of a guilty secret? Assuredly not. He had the straight outlook of one whose conscience is clear, whose heart is free from guile. If he were verily guilty, he must be the prince of hypocrites.

His wife was at his side, and George Gerard looked at her with painful interest. What a lovely trustful face, radiant with innocence and contentment. And was this guileless creature to be made wretched by the knowledge of her husband's deceit? Was her heart to be broken in order that John Treverton should be punished?

Edward Clare had said that it was for her sake he wanted to know the truth about her husband, it was that she might be rescued from a degrading alliance, protected from a man who was at heart a villain.

George Gerard watched the husband and wife at intervals during the service. He could see nothing but placid content, a mind at ease, in the face of John Treverton. The idea of this freedom from care on the part of him who had been La Chicot's husband embittered Gerard.

‘Had that woman been my wife I should have been sorry for her cruel fate, I should have mourned for her honestly, in spite of her degradation. But had she been my wife, she would never have sunk so low. I would have made it the business of my life to have saved her.’

Thus argued the man who had passionately loved the beautiful, soulless woman, and who had never comprehended the emptiness of her mind and heart.

Once in the progress of the service John Treverton looked across the aisle, and saw the stern grey eyes watching him. In that one glance Gerard saw that he was recognised.

‘What will he do if we meet presently?’ Gerard asked himself. ‘He’ll cut me dead, no doubt.’

They did meet, for in leaving the church porch Laura stopped to talk to Mrs. Clare and Celia. Edward and his friend were close behind.

‘Is it the man?’ Edward asked, in a whisper.

‘Yes,’ answered Gerard.

They went along the churchyard path together, and at the gates there was a pause. Laura wanted the vicarage party to go to luncheon at the Manor-house, but Mrs. Clare declined. Of course the children could do what they liked, she said; as if her children had ever done anything else since they had emerged from the helplessness of infancy. Even in their cradles they had had wills of their own.

Celia looked at her brother, and saw by a warning twitch of his eyebrows that she was to say no.

‘I think we had better go home to luncheon,’ she said, meekly. ‘Papa likes us to be at home on Sundays.’

Then she gave her brother’s sleeve a little tug.

‘You haven’t introduced Mr. Gerard,’ she whispered.

‘Ah, to be sure. Mr. Gerard, Mrs. Treverton Mr. Treverton.’

‘Mr. Gerard and I have met before, under circumstances that made me deeply indebted to him,’ said John Treverton, holding out his hand.

Gerard lifted his hat, but appeared not to see the offered hand. This unexpected frankness took him by surprise. He had been prepared for anything rather than for John Treverton’s acknowledgment of their past acquaintance.

It was a bold stroke if the man were guilty; but Gerard’s experience had taught him that guilt is generally bold.

‘I should be glad of ten minutes’ talk with you, Mr. Gerard,’ said Treverton. ‘Will you walk my way?’

‘We’ll all walk as far as the Manor-House,’ said Celia. ‘We need not be home till two, need we, mother?’

‘No, dear, but be sure you are punctual,’ answered the good-natured mother. ‘I shall say good-bye, Laura, my dear.’

While Laura lingered a little to take leave of

Mrs. Clare, Treverton and Gerard walked on in front of Celia and her brother, along the frost-bound road, under the leafless elms.

‘The world is much smaller than I took it to be,’ John Treverton began, after a pause, ‘or you and I would hardly meet in such an out-of-the-way corner of it as this.’

Gerard said nothing.

‘Were you not surprised to see me in so altered a position?’ the other asked, after an uncomfortable pause.

‘Yes, I was certainly surprised.’

‘I am going to appeal to your kind feeling—nay, to your honour. My wife knows nothing of my past life, save that it was wild and foolish. You know too well what degradation there was for me in my first marriage. I am not going to speak ill of the dead——’

‘Pray do not,’ interposed Gerard, very pale.

‘But I must speak plainly. When you knew me I was a most miserable man. I have stood upon one of the bridges many a night, and thought that the best thing I could do with myself

was to drop quietly over. Well, Providence cut the knot for me—in a terrible manner—but still the knot was cut. I have profited by my release. Fate has been very kind to me. My wife is the dearest and noblest of women. To pluck the veil from my past history would be to give her infinite pain. I ask you, then, as a gentleman, as a man of honour, to keep my secret and to spare her and me.'

'And you,' said Gerard, bitterly. 'Yes, it is doubtless of yourself you think when you ask me to be silent. To spare you? Did you pity or spare the wretched creature who loved you fondly even in her degradation? As for your secret, as you call it, it is no secret. Mr. Clare, the Vicar's son, knows as well as I do that John Chicot and John Treverton are one and the same.'

'He knows it? Edward Clare?'

'Yes.'

'Since when?'

'Positively, since this morning in church. He had his suspicions before. This morning I was able to confirm them.'

'I am sorry for it,' said John Treverton, after

they had walked a few paces in silence. 'I am sorry for it, I had hoped that part of my life was dead and buried—that no phantom from that hateful past would ever arise to haunt my innocent young wife. It is very hard upon me : it is harder upon her.'

'There are some ghosts not easily laid,' returned Gerard. 'I should think the ghost of a murdered wife was one of them.'

'Edward Clare is no friend to me,' pursued Treverton, hardly hearing Gerard's remark. 'He will make the most malicious use of this knowledge that he can. He will tell my wife.'

'Might he not do something worse than that?'

'What?'

'What if he were to tell the police where Chicot, the wife-murderer, is to be found?'

'My God!' cried Treverton, turning upon the speaker with a look of horror. 'You do not think me that?'

'Unhappily, I do.'

'On what grounds?'

'First, on the strength of your cowardly conduct

that night. Why should you shirk the responsibility of your position if you were not guilty? Your flight was damning evidence against you. Surely you must have known that when you fled?’

‘I ought to have known it, perhaps; but I thought of nothing except how best and quickest to escape from the entanglement which had been the bane and blight of my manhood. My wife was dead. Those glassy eyes, with their awful look of horror,—that marble hand—told me that life had been gone for hours. What good could I do by remaining? Attend an inquest at which the story of my life would be ripped up for the delight of every gossip-monger in the kingdom; until I, John Treverton, alias Chicot, stood face to face with the world, so tainted and infected that no innocent woman could own me as her husband? What good to me, to that poor dead woman, or to society at large, could have come of my cross-examination at the inquest?’

‘This much good, at least: your innocence—if you are innocent—might have been made manifest.

As it is, the inferences are all in favour of your guilt.'

'How could I have proved my innocence? I could have offered no stronger proof at the inquest than I offer you now—my own word, the word of a man who at his worst never stooped to dishonour. I tell you face to face, as man to man, that I never lifted my hand against my wife: never, even when words were bitter between us, and of late we had many bitter words. I tried, honestly, to save her from her own weakness. The day had been when I was fond of her, in a reckless way, never looking forward to the future, or thinking what kind of a couple she and I would be when age had sobered us, and life had grown real and serious. No, Mr. Gerard, I am not a cruel man; and though the fetters hung heavily upon me I should never have striven to set myself free. When I saw those people—Desrolles and the two women, standing round me that night, it flashed upon me all at once that in their eyes I might look like a murderer. And then I foresaw suspicion, difficulties of all kinds, and above all that which I

most dreaded, a hideous notoriety. If I stayed all this was inevitable. I might escape everything if I could get away. At that moment I considered only my own interest. I saw as it were a gate standing open leading into a new world. Was I very much to blame if I took advantage of my chance, and left my old life behind me ?

‘No man can leave his past life behind him,’ answered Gerard. ‘If you are innocent I am sorry for you; as I should be sorry for any innocent man who had acted so as to seem guilty. I am still more sorry for your wife.’

‘Yes, you have need to be sorry for her,’ said Treverton, with a quiet anguish that touched even the man who thought him guilty. ‘God help her, poor girl. We have been very happy together: but if Edward Clare holds our happiness in his hand our peaceful days are at an end.’

They were at the Manor House gate by this time, and here they stopped and waited in silence for the others to join them. Celia and Laura had been talking together merrily, while Edward walked beside them, silent and thoughtful.

John Treverton shook hands with Celia, but he only gave Edward a curt nod of adieu.

‘Good morning, Mr. Gerard,’ he said, with cold courtesy. ‘Come, Laura, if Celia has made up her mind to go home to luncheon we mustn’t detain her.’

‘Duty prevails over inclination,’ said Celia, laughingly. ‘If I were to come to the Manor House I should forget my Sunday-school work. From three to four o’clock I have to give my mind to Scripture history. How dreadfully absorbed you look, Mr. Gerard!’ she exclaimed, struck by the surgeon’s thoughtful aspect. ‘Have you any serious case in London that is preying upon your mind?’

‘I have plenty of serious cases, Miss Clare, but I was not thinking of them just then,’ he answered, smiling at her piquant little face, turned to him interrogatively. ‘My patients are mostly sufferers from an incurable malady.’

‘Good gracious, poor things! Is it an epidemic?’

‘No, a chronic disorder—poverty.’

‘Oh, poor souls, then I’m sure I pity them. I’ve been subject to occasional attacks towards the end of the quarter ever since I’ve been an independent being with a fixed allowance.’

They were walking homewards by this time, Edward in the rear.

‘Now, do you seriously think, Miss Clare, that a young lady, living in her father’s house, with every want provided for, can know the meaning of the word poverty?’

‘Certainly I do, Mr. Gerard. But I must tell you that you start upon false premises. Young ladies living in their fathers’ houses have not always every want provided for. I have known what it is to be desperately in want of six-button gloves, and not to be able to get them.’

‘You have never known what it is to want bread.’

‘I’m not particularly fond of bread,’ said Celia, ‘but I have often had to complain of the disgusting staleness of the loaf they give us at luncheon.’

‘Ah, Miss Clare, when I was a student at Marischal College, Aberdeen, I have seen many a

young fellow walking the street in his scarlet gown, gaunt and hungry-eyed, to whom a hunch of your stale loaf would have been a luxury. When a Scotch parson sends his son to the University he is not always able to give him the price of a daily dinner. Well for the lad if he can be sure of a bowl of porridge for his breakfast and supper.'

'Poor dear creatures,' cried Celia. 'I'm afraid Edward spends as much money on gloves and cigars as would keep an economical young man at a Scotch University—but then he is a poet.'

'Is a poet necessarily a spendthrift?'

'Upon my word I don't know, but poets seem generally given that way, don't they? One can hardly expect them to be very careful about pounds, shillings, and pence. Their heads are in the clouds, and they have no eyes for the small transactions of daily life.'

After this they walked on for a little while in silence, George Gerard thoughtfully contemplative of the fair young face, with its mignon prettiness and frivolous expression.

‘It would be a misfortune, as well as a folly, for a man of my stamp to admire such a girl as that,’ he told himself; ‘but I may allow myself to be amused by her.’

A minute afterwards Edward Clare came up to him, and took him by the arm.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘what passed between you and Treverton?’

‘A good deal, yet it amounts to very little. I am sorry for him.’

‘Then you do not believe that he killed his wife?’

‘I don’t know. It is a profound mystery. I should advise you to let things take their own course. What good will it do for you to make that poor wife of his miserable? If he is guilty, punishment will come sooner or later. If he is innocent, it would be a hard thing for you to persecute him.’

‘What, do you suppose I am such a milksop as to let him go on his way unquestioned? I, who have loved Laura, and lost her? Suppose him even innocent of the murder—which is more

than I am ready to believe,—he is guilty of a cruel fraud upon his present wife, of an impudent fraud upon the trustees to Jasper Treverton's estate, of whom my father is one. He has no more right to yonder Manor House than I have. His marriage with Laura Malcolm is no marriage. Am I to hold my peace, knowing all this?'

'To reveal what you know will be to break Mrs. Treverton's heart, and to reduce her to beggary. Hardly the act of a friend.'

'I may give her pain, but I shall not reduce her to beggary. She has a small income of her own.'

'And the Manor House estate will be devoted to the creation of an hospital.'

'Those are the conditions of Jasper Treverton's will.'

'As a professional man I am bound to rejoice; but as a mere human being I can't help feeling sorry for Mrs. Treverton. She seems devoted to her husband.'

'Yes,' answered Edward, 'he has contrived to hoodwink her; but perhaps when she knows that

John Treverton is Jack Chicot, the ballet-dancer's husband, she will be disenchanted.'

Gerard made no reply. He began to understand that personal malignity was the mainspring of Edward's anxiety to let in the light upon John Treverton's secret. He was almost sorry that he had lent his aid to the discovery; yet he had ardently desired that justice should be done upon La Chicot's murderer. It was only since his recent conversation with John Treverton that his opinion as to the husband's guilt had begun to waver.

He was haunted all the rest of the day by uncomfortable thoughts about the master of Hazlehurst Manor and his fair young wife; thoughts so uncomfortable as to prevent his enjoyment of Celia's lively company, which had all the charm of novelty to a man whose youth had not been brightened by girlish society, and whose way of life had been dull, and hard, and laborious. He was to go back to London next morning by the first train, and although the Vicar pressed him to

remain, and even Celia put in a kindly word, he stuck to his intention.

‘My practice is not of a kind that will bear being trifled with,’ he said when he had thanked Mr. Clare for his proffered hospitality. ‘The few remunerative patients I have would be quick to take offence if they fancied I neglected them.’

‘But you give yourself a holiday sometimes, I suppose?’ said Mrs. Clare, whose large maternal heart had a kindly feeling for all young men, simply because her son belonged to that section of society. ‘You go to stay with your relations now and then, don’t you?’

‘No, my dear Mrs. Clare, I do not; and for the best of all reasons—I have no relations. I am the last twig of a withered tree.’

‘How sad!’ replied the Vicar’s wife.

Celia echoed the sigh, and looked compassionately at the surgeon, and compassion in Celia’s blue eyes was a sentiment no man could afford to despise.

‘If you will let me come again some day, when

I have made a little progress in my profession, you will be giving me something pleasant to look forward to,' said Gerard.

'My dear fellow, we shall always be glad to see you,' the Vicar answered, heartily. 'It strikes me you are the kind of friend my son wants.'

END OF VOL. II.

